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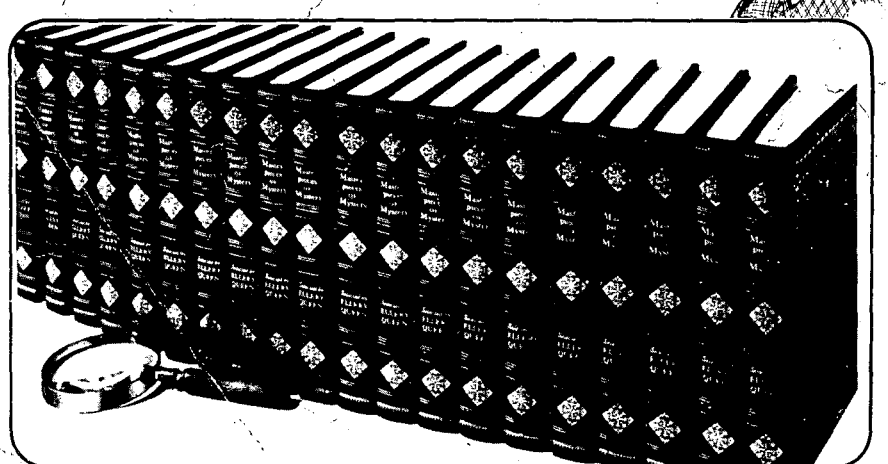

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Will mercenary Mercer reach the top rung of the ladder? . . .

THE MAN AT THE TOP

by MICHAEL GILBERT

"This man," said Shallini, "has taken a room. It is the room inside the front door, on the left."

"Why shouldn't he?" said Mercer.

"But you remember, when we came. The landlady told us it was a room she never let. Never. It was her own spare room."

"Maybe she's hard up."

"She is not hard up. She has a great deal of money. I think she keeps it under her mattress."

"She's stupid enough to do just that," agreed Mercer. "But why does it worry you?"

"I do not like these strange men. First they watch the house. Now they come and live here."

"What's strange about this one?"

Shallini considered the matter, then said, "He wears glasses."

"Don't bother your sweet head about him," said Mercer. "If he wears glasses and looks strange he's a tax inspector. And bustle along with those scrambled eggs. I've got a feeling it's going to be a busy day at the office."

Unless the weather was foul, Mercer liked to walk to work. It gave both him and the people who followed him some exercise. An expert himself in the art of maintaining observation, he was interested in the careful network which enfolded him. It was ably done and unless he had been watching out for it, he would probably have missed the links in the chain. A youth on a bicycle. A girl on a moped. A small closed van. A one-legged newspaper vendor. A number of less easily identifiable men and women on foot. The permutations and combinations were made skillfully and unobtrusively.

Nothing unexpected in that. When he had taken on the number two job, Mr. Henderson had told him, "You're on probation." If being on probation included being under observation, that was understandable too. In this game no player trusted any other player far-

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ther than he could see him. If he ever took Mr. Henderson's place at the top, he would watch his number two just as carefully—well, to start with, anyway.

Mr. Henderson had defined the scope of his job with equal succinctness. "You're a middle man. You'll get instructions. You pass them on. And you see that they're carried out."

A beautifully watertight system, with half a dozen cutouts, everything operating downward and no leads back to the man at the top.

When Mercer got to his office in the building occupied by Arnold Rowe and Company (Ships' Chandlers and General Marine Suppliers) in Lower Creek Street, he examined the dozen letters which had arrived with the morning post. One of them seemed to interest him. It was in a dark-blue good-quality envelope and was addressed to him by name. The word *CONFIDENTIAL* had been stamped in red on the top left-hand side of the envelope. The word was enclosed in a rectangular frame, which was tilted very slightly to the left.

Before opening the envelope, Mercer took out a ruler and measured the distance between the top left-hand corner of the frame and the corner of the envelope. He seemed satisfied with the result and slit open the envelope. It contained a single sheet of dark-blue paper and a cloakroom ticket from the Main Line baggage room at Victoria. On the paper was typed the name Van der Hoek, followed by an Amsterdam telephone number. Underneath, also typed, were the words: Bapu Ram—*S.S. Torridge*—Two percent additional.

Mercer pocketed the cloakroom ticket, memorized the telephone number, and fed both paper and envelope into an APC shredder. Then he left his office and walked along the corridor until he reached a door in the blank wall at the end, which he opened with a key on his own ring. This was a communicating door which led at first-story level into the adjoining premises of the Maritime Employment Agency. He found Bapu Ram, a tall serious-looking Pakistani with an incongruous Groucho Marx mustache, interviewing a girl applicant for a job.

Mercer said, "As soon as you've finished, would you step along for a moment to the Conference Room?"

Under the previous management, a management which had terminated abruptly when its nominal head Arnold Rowe had been shot down outside his own flat, Bapu Ram had been a difficult employee and had even headed a successful strike. Mercer had managed to keep on reasonably good terms with him. He knew him to be resourceful.

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Mercer said, "We've got a ferrying job in hand. Amsterdam. Okay?"

"The usual terms?"

"Plus two percent."

"Very well." Bapu Ram held out his hand and Mercer gave him the cloakroom ticket, repeating the name and telephone number and going on until he was certain Bapu had them correctly. That, for the moment, was all that he had to do.

What would happen next he had learned at second and third hand—from Shallini's friend, from casual remarks overheard, from occasional drunken indiscretions. He guessed that Bapu would collect a suitcase full of innocent truck and would find the real contents concealed in the lining or handle of the case. On this occasion, since the destination was Amsterdam, it would probably be precious stones. These he would conceal either on his person or more probably in the cabin stores which would be sent aboard the *S.S. Torridge* and which would be under his control as steward.

In Amsterdam, Bapu would complete the sale to Van der Hoek, the terms of which would already have been agreed upon. His normal take was five percent of the proceeds. In this case he would get an extra two percent. The balance he would bring back in notes, similarly hidden, which would be stowed away in Mercer's office safe. Later, sometimes after a considerable interval, he would be given a rendezvous on the outskirts of London, would drive out, and hand the notes to a third party who would arrive in a car which had been stolen for that one trip and would then be abandoned.

Mercer gave high marks to the planning which had gone into the scheme. The profits were represented by the difference between the paltry price an English thief would get from a receiver in this country and the much larger price which a safer foreign buyer would pay for the same goods. Even allowing for the incidental expenses and commissions, the margin must be very handsome. And suppose he had wanted to give Mr. Henderson away to the police? What evidence had he got to connect him with the operation? "Not a sausage," said Mercer. "Clever as they come."

He said this to Shallini, who was busy setting the supper table. Shallini said, "He is very clever. No one sees him. We are not even supposed to know his name. It is even dangerous to mention it. Purunmal was punished for doing so."

"Is that the chap I saw hobbling round on crutches? I heard he'd fallen off a mobile crane when he was drunk."

"No. But when he was drunk, he could not control his tongue."

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"There are people like that," agreed Mercer.

After supper he said, "I'm going out now. If anyone should want me, tell them I'll be back in about an hour."

The flat which he and Shallini were using was on the second floor. Mercer walked down the two flights of stairs, taking no particular precautions against noise. When he reached the hall he noticed that the doorway of the room Shallini had mentioned was ajar. He noticed also that the telephone, which was the only one in the building, had been moved. It now stood on a table outside that door.

They were giving him the full treatment, Mercer thought. He wondered how much of it was psychological, intended to warn him that he was under surveillance. They could not really hope to keep tabs on him every minute; nor could they keep it up indefinitely.

He went out into the street banging the front door behind him and proceeded at a moderate pace toward the High Street. When he reached the China Clipper he went into the Saloon Bar, nodded to the landlord, walked straight through and out by the door at the back, which gave onto an alley. This led, in turn, to a maze of little dockside streets. Mercer made his way through them, unhurriedly but quietly, and finally came out into the High Street 200 yards farther along.

As he did so a west-going bus was moving away from the stop. Mercer hopped on board and took a seat which allowed him to watch the passengers getting on and off. After a while he seemed satisfied, left the bus, and immediately dived down a side street.

Five minutes later he was ringing the bell of a flat in the Southwark area. The girl who opened the door did not seem surprised to see him. She was wearing a housecoat, had a scarf covering her hair, and a blob of whitewash on her nose. Mercer thought she looked very attractive.

"I'm just getting things straight," she said.

"So I can see," said Mercer.

"It was good of you to find me this place so quickly."

"It had to be quick. I gather from my friends that you'd been blown. If you hadn't moved smartly you'd have been in for a pack of trouble. What I can't see is why A10 didn't pull you out altogether."

"I suppose they thought there was still something for me to do."

"You've done your job. You've given them Detective Sergeant Russ nicely tied up with a label round his neck. What more do they want?"

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"Actually, I understand Russ is to be left where he is. For the time being."

"For God's sake," said Mercer, his face going red. "What are they playing at? Russ is a bent copper. All they have to do is collect him and put him away somewhere, where he won't do any more harm."

"They were very grateful for the tip you gave us."

"I don't want gratitude. I want Russ out of the way. Why do they think I went to all that trouble to collect enough evidence for you to nail him?"

"It's a question a lot of people have been asking," said the girl calmly.

For a moment it looked as though Mercer was going to do or say something violent. Then, quite suddenly, the anger left him. The girl, who was watching him closely, had noticed the same thing before. His changes of mood were as sudden and unpredictable as changes in autumn weather.

He had sat down on the end of the bed, which was almost the only piece of furniture in the small room, and stayed there unmoving. The only sign of life in him was when the tip of his tongue came out, moved over his upper lip from left to right, and over his lower lip from right to left, and went in again.

Then he said, "I wonder."

Mr. Henderson sat in the beautiful drawing room of his house in Wilfred Street. The windows were wide-open and brought in the scent of the carnations and stocks from the hidden garden at the back. He looked up from the handwritten report he was studying as the boy came in. He was wearing a white housecoat and carried a tray of drinks.

Mr. Henderson said, "Put it down, Bobby. I want to hear about Mercer. You can sit down."

The boy said, "Well, thanks very much," managing to make it sound grateful and impertinent at the same time.

"According to this report, he seems to be playing it straight down the middle."

"He hasn't stepped out of line yet."

"There was some question about a girl."

"You mean Shallini?"

"No. We know about Shallini. He's been living with her for a long time—she came back with him when he had to leave the Middle East. There's another one."

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"There was a bint in the Salvation Army. Quite a good looker. Name said to be Millicent Ford."

"Said to be?"

"There was a buzz that she wasn't all she pretended to be."

"You'll have to be rather more explicit," said Mr. Henderson. "Do you mean that, although attached to that excellent institution, the Salvation Army, her morals were not all they would have wished?"

"The buzz was that she was a copper."

"Really?" said Mr. Henderson. "I should have thought it was a rough part of London for a female policeman to be operating in alone."

"Someone else must have come to the same conclusion. She's pulled out."

"And Mercer was familiar with her?"

"It depends what you mean by familiar," said Bobby with a grin which showed all his sharp white teeth. "If you mean, was he living with her, I couldn't say. I wouldn't have blamed him. The only time I saw her, I thought she was a roly-poly pudding. I could have gone for her myself."

"Get up."

At the change in Mr. Henderson's voice the boy jerked onto his feet.

"I have told you before, Bobby, that I don't like that sort of talk. I should hate to have to whip you."

"You wouldn't hate it as much as I should," said Bobby earnestly. "Is that all for now, sir?"

"That is all for the moment."

On the following morning Mercer said to Shallini, "If we had to clear out quick, is there anywhere you could go?"

"I have a sister at Portsmouth. I could perhaps go to her. Why?"

"I've got a feeling things may be getting a bit uncomfortable round here soon."

Shallini said, "You are thinking of something evil?"

"That's right, love," said Mercer. "I'm having very evil thoughts indeed."

In fact, he was waiting for a telephone call which he knew must come sooner or later. It came at the end of three days of exceptional heat, when men worked stripped to the waist and women spent the evening gossiping outside their doorways, as an alternative to going into their oven-like houses.

Mercer was on the point of going home when the telephone on his

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desk rang. A man's voice said, "You know who I am and you know why I want a word with you."

"I can guess," said Mercer.

"Okay. Do you know a café called Ron-and-Lon? About seven miles out on the Dartford Road. It's a pull-up for lorries. There won't be many people there at this time of night."

"I can find it."

"I'll be waiting for you."

Mercer got his car out of the yard next door and drove out into the sun-baked Kentish countryside. If there were people watching him he took no apparent notice of it, but drove slowly, tucked into the stream of home-going commuter traffic.

Ron-and-Lon's café was a construction of cement blocks, set back from the road behind a big lorry park which was empty except for two lorries and a single private car. Mercer parked alongside the car, but facing outward. He locked the car door and stood for a moment looking back at the way he had come. Behind him the sky was deep red, almost like a new Fire of London.

He stalked into the café, jerked the door open, and banged it shut behind him. A group of four lorry drivers looked up and then went on with their game of nap. The only other occupant of the room, sitting at a table in the far corner, was Detective Sergeant Russ.

Mercer stopped at the counter to pick up and pay for a cup of tea, carried it across to the far table, and set it down with a thump which spilled a lot of the tea into the saucer. Then he said, "Well? What is it? What do you want?"

Russ looked at Mercer in surprise. He had never seen him in this mood before. He said, forcing some truculence into his own voice, "I don't know what you've got to beef about. I'm the one who's complaining."

Mercer said, "And what the hell have you got to complain about?"

He hadn't troubled to lower his voice. Russ looked at the lorry drivers and then said, speaking quietly, "You know damn well what it's about, Mercer. I had an arrangement with your old boss, Arnold Rowe. He made a payment every quarter to the company that's got a mortgage on my house. Right?"

Mercer said nothing.

"The payment was due last week. It hasn't been made. I want to know why."

"Then I'll tell you why." Mercer was smiling, but there was nothing pleasant in the smile. "When you're dealing with a bent copper,

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you like him to be bent in one direction only."

"What the hell do you mean?"

"You've been blown, boyo. A10 uncovered your mortgage fiddle and one or two other little fiddles as well. They had you on the end of a string, Russ. But they didn't pull it tight. I wondered why. And now I've found out. They thought they could use a little fish like you to catch a bigger fish. Two nights ago you saw old man Morrissey and don't pretend you don't know who I mean. You're so bloody stupid you didn't even know you were being followed. You were chatting to him for half an hour, I heard, in his car in a lay-by in the Lewisham Bypass. What sort of bargain did he make with you?"

Russ had climbed slowly to his feet. His face was white and he was breathing through his nose.

He said, "I went because Morrissey's one of the top brass, and he sent for me. He chose the spot, not me. As for the rest of it, it's just a load of bull."

"You calling me a liar?" Mercer picked up his cup and jerked the hot tea at Russ. Most of it went down the front of his shirt. Russ grunted, pushed the table aside, and came for Mercer, who kicked him, without fuss, on the left kneecap. As Russ heeled over, Mercer picked a plate off the table and broke it over Russ's head.

He said, "That's just for starters. It'll seem like soft music to what Mr. Henderson's going to do to you when he hears."

He made for the door. The proprietor said, "Hey! What's all this about?"

Mercer pointed to Russ, who was squatting on the floor, nursing his knee. There were splinters of china on his bald scalp and blood was running down his face. Mercer said, "He'll pay for the damage."

The proprietor was about to say something, but saw the expression on Mercer's face and refrained. The lorry drivers seemed to be concentrating on their card game. Mercer went out and drove slowly back toward London. When he reached home he sat down at the telephone table in the hall and started to dial a number. The door of the room next to the telephone was shut, but he had no doubt that an extension had been led through into the room. When he had finished dialing, the telephone at the other end went on ringing for some time. Mercer waited patiently. There was a click and a tired voice said, "Oo is it?"

"Mercer here. Would you pass a message, please. I want a contact and I want it quick. I'll wait here till you ring back."

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The voice said, "Okay," and the telephone went dead.

Mercer sat on, unmoving. An occasional car went past in the street outside. Ten minutes later the telephone rang. Mercer lifted the receiver. The same voice said, "Westcomb Park Road. The Maze Hill end. An hour from now."

Mercer reached the rendezvous with time to spare and sat in his car smoking. A big car, using side lights only, drew up behind him. Bobby got out, climbed into Mercer's car, and wriggled down into the seat beside him. He looked very smart in his chauffeur's uniform of dark blue with silver buttons. He said, "What's the crisis, daddy? Someone been horrid to you? Tell Bobby all about it."

At the end of it Bobby said, "Well, well, well—that's not good, is it? Quite contrary to Scout Law. Did you say you clobbered him. With a plate?"

"I lost my temper. It was a stupid thing to do."

"Excusable, in the circumstances. We shall have to do something about this. Won't we?"

"The sooner the better," said Mercer.

"Just you leave it to me," said Bobby. He sounded excited.

When he got back to Wilfred Street, Mr. Henderson was waiting for him. He was sitting in a big chair in front of the open window smoking a cigar. The only light in the room was reflected from a lamp on the patio outside the window. He listened to what Bobby had to say. When he had finished, he asked, "Has it all been cross-checked?"

"It certainly has. When Mercer heard this meeting might be taking place he had Banks follow him. And in case there was any slip-up, Loveridge followed Banks."

"And they both say that Russ met Morrissey and sat in the car with him for half an hour?"

"Right."

The tip of the cigar glowed red in the half darkness as Mr. Henderson drew on it. He said, "A dangerous man."

"A stupid little two-timer really," said Bobby.

"I wasn't referring to Detective Sergeant Russ. I was speaking about Morrissey. He used to be the C.I.D. head of Number 1 District. Now I hear he's in charge of the Metropolitan section of the Special Crimes Squads. Ten years ago I watched him boxing in the police heavyweight finals. He didn't just knock his man down." Mr. Henderson smiled at the thought. "He knocked him clean out of the ring."

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"Oh, he's a tough character," said Bobby. "No question."

"So now we must think what to do about stupid little Sergeant Russ."

"Yes," said Bobby. He sounded like a boy who is hoping he might be offered a bar of chocolate.

"You'd enjoy dealing with him yourself?"

"I most certainly would."

"Have you got any ideas?"

Bobby hesitated, but was encouraged by the benevolent look on Mr. Henderson's face. He said, "There was a thing. I read it in one of my—well—it was in one of those comics you got me from America. These gangsters took one of the gang. They found out he'd been betraying them. They took his clothes off and fastened him by the heels to the back bumper of their car and dragged him along the road, face downwards. What was left of him at the end, they threw into the river."

Mr. Henderson was watching Bobby's face while the words tumbled out. He seemed to be sharing the enjoyment which he saw there.

He said, "No. I'm afraid not, Bobby. It'll have to be something a lot simpler than that. Have a word with Mercer. He'll help you set it up."

"I don't need Mercer to help me," said Bobby, pouting.

"All the same, you will use him," said Mr. Henderson gently. "That is an order. And you know what happens to you if you are disobedient."

"I'm not being disobedient." Mr. Henderson could tell that tears were not far away. "It's just that I wanted to do this all by myself, to help you."

Mr. Henderson slid one arm round the boy and drew him up to him. He said, "That was very nice of you, Bobby. But you've got to be careful. We're dealing with dangerous people. Use Mercer. He's a professional. He'll set it up for you."

"As long as I can do the actual killing."

"Yes. You can do it. And I expect you can manage to hurt him a bit while you're doing it. But nothing too elaborate. You're not cross with me?"

"Not any longer," said Bobby. He sounded happy again. The chocolate had been given back.

"Of course I'll help," said Mercer. "I loathe the guy. The only

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thing is, I'd better not chop him myself. Seeing I've already busted a plate on his head. If something happens to him in the near future, I'm likely to be the number one suspect."

"That's right," said Bobby. "I'm going to kill him myself. Mr. Henderson promised me I should."

"Okay. Had you got any ideas?"

"I was thinking perhaps we could trap him in his house. We'd tie him to a chair and I could use this gun. I'm a good shot."

"You lowered Arnold Rowe in two, from across the road," agreed Mercer.

Bobby looked up and said sharply, "Who told you that?"

"These things get about. The boys respected you for it, you know."

"I suppose there's no harm in people knowing. This gun's a German Army P.38. It carries eight bullets. What I was thinking was, I could put one shot in each of his legs, one in each arm, two in the stomach, then two in the heart. Of course, I'd wait some time before firing the last two shots. I like seeing people squirm, you know."

Mercer looked curiously at the boy. His eyes were bright, his lips slightly open. He said, "He'd certainly be squirming by that time. But I don't think we can do it quite like that."

"Why not? The gun's got a silencer. No one's going to hear."

"The trouble is, he doesn't live by himself. He's got a wife. And a daughter."

"We could tie them up too and let them watch."

Mercer nearly said, "You've been reading too many horror comics, sonny." Instead he affected to consider the matter, then shook his head.

"Too complicated," he said. "Too many things might go wrong. No. Keep it simple. Here's how we must do it. Tomorrow evening I'll get Banks to watch the Police Station. That's the Divisional Headquarters Station which Russ operates from. We shall have to know the moment he comes off duty. Unless there's something special on hand it's normally around seven o'clock. As soon as he starts for home, Banks telephones me. I'll be waiting for the call at the café near the end of Swains Lane. You'll be in a car, which you'll have to steal for the job, parked opposite the corner of the street. Okay so far?"

"It doesn't sound very exciting."

"It gets better as it goes along. When Russ turns the corner I shall be coming from the other direction. I'll time it so that I'm opposite to him, but on the other side. I'll call out something which will stop

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him in his tracks. He may even start to cross the road to take a poke at me. That's when you fire. Aim for his legs first. When he's down on the ground you can empty the gun into him if you like, only for God's sake don't waste too much time."

"That sounds more like it," agreed Bobby.

"The only thing is, I hope you really *can* shoot. I don't want you to hit *me* in the leg."

"Don't you worry," said Bobby. The thought of stealing a car seemed to have cheered him up a lot.

At six o'clock on the following evening Mercer finished packing the second of two large suitcases. A smaller case with Shallini's personal belongings in it had already been packed.

He said, "When you wrote to your sister in Portsmouth telling her to expect you tonight, you did warn her not to write back or try to telephone you?"

"I did. She must have thought it most peculiar."

"Blame it on me. I've ordered a car. It will be here in five minutes. The driver has been told that he has to take you to Waterloo. *There's no need to say anything to him.* When you get there, the driver will help you with the suitcases."

"What about the furniture?"

"Are you very attached to it?"

Shallini looked at it and shuddered. "Not very. No."

"Then you won't be sorry to hear that I've sold it to our landlady. She was so glad to get rid of us, she paid what I asked, without arguing."

Shallini said, "You are going to do something horrible and you will not tell me what it is."

Mercer put an arm round her and said, "You're imagining things, love."

"I am not imagining. You have spoken in your sleep."

Mercer seemed more amused than alarmed. He said, "What did I say?"

"First you said, 'Bobby.' Several times. Then you said, 'Mr. Henderson.' Bobby is Mr. Henderson's friend, is he not? His close friend."

"That's a very delicate way of putting it," said Mercer. "Listen. I think I can hear the car."

He picked up both the large suitcases, one in each hand. They were heavy cases, but seemed to cause him no difficulty. Shallini took the small case, her coat and handbag, and followed him out

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onto the landing. She took a last look back, switched off the light, and shut the door.

By the time she reached the front hall, Mercer had already put the big cases into the back of the car and had come back and was standing in the open doorway. He stood aside to let Shallini pass. This brought him up against the telephone table. He put one hand out and wrenched the telephone cord out of the wall.

As Shallini climbed into the car, the room door behind him opened and a small man shot out. Mercer's bulk was blocking the front door.

The small man had opened his mouth to say something, when Mercer's hand landed on his chest and shoved him back into the room. Outside in the street they could hear the car starting up.

Mercer said, "Watch it, chum. You were put in here as a spy. Not as a muscle man. There's no call for you to commit suicide." With a final push he propelled the small man into an armchair.

He said, "I imagine you're doing this on commission for old man Henderson. Right?"

The man said, "I can't—"

"No. Of course you can't. Just listen to me. If you value your hide, you'll creep back into whatever hole you came out of and stay there. There's going to be a raft of trouble very soon. Unless you want to get involved in it, get clear and stay clear. It's a last chance. Do you get me?"

The man in the chair seemed to be past speech. His mouth was opening and shutting, but no sound came out. Mercer looked at him thoughtfully.

He said, "What I ought to do is tie you up, cover your face with sticking plaster, and put you in the bath. But it would be troublesome and I don't think it's necessary."

"No need to do that," said the man. "No need at all." His voice rose into a squeak which almost made Mercer laugh. "I'm getting out."

"That's sensible," said Mercer. "Stop here for half an hour. Then you can go."

The man nodded his agreement to this suggestion. He nodded so hard that a handsome top set of false teeth became detached and had to be eased back into place.

Mercer came out of the Bluebell Café and waved a hand toward the battered Volkswagen which was parked opposite the end of

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Swains Lane with all its windows shut. Then he walked without haste down the street and propped himself up against a garden wall 20 yards farther on. He had timed exactly how long it took Russ to get home from the Police Station. Seventeen minutes. Unless, of course, he stopped for a drink on the way, but this was unlikely with his supper waiting for him.

Five minutes.

He wondered what other men, apart from Banks, Bobby, and himself, Mr. Henderson had put onto the job. He was a person who liked to check and double check all his operations. The fact that he could see no watchers proved nothing.

Ten minutes.

He wondered what Bobby was doing. Fiddling with the safety catch of the P.38 probably. He hoped that he was as good a shot as he thought he was.

Fifteen minutes.

Any moment now. Was that Russ turning into the road? Yes, that was him all right.

Mercer moved deliberately toward him, keeping to the opposite side of the street. As he reached a point across from Russ, he shouted, "Hullo Russo, how's the head?" Russ stopped and swung round. Mercer saw the window of the Volkswagen go down and the glint of a gun. Russ was already halfway across the street. He was limping slightly from the kick he had had in the knee, but that wasn't stopping him.

Mercer shouted, "Dodge, you fool! The car behind you. Dodge or fall down."

Russ jerked his head round. Mercer saw the flash, heard the dull plop of the silenced gun, and saw Russ go down. He wasn't sure whether he'd been hit or was taking evasive action.

At that moment a police car, coming down the main road, squealed to a halt, ramming the Volkswagen as it did so. Two uniformed policemen piled out. Another shot went off. Mercer said, "Damn, the stupid bugger. He's hit one of them."

The driver was out of the police car by now, coming round the far side of the Volkswagen. There was a swirl of bodies, a crash of broken glass, and Bobby was dragged out onto the pavement. One of the policemen had a firm grip of his long blond hair, the other had him by one ankle.

Russ was on his knees, clasping his left shin. Blood was showing through the trouser leg. It seemed to be oozing, not spurting.

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"Missed the artery," Mercer thought. As long as Bobby hasn't killed the squaddie, the score to date looked about right. It was time he made himself scarce. He doubled off, fast, down the pavement. Russ shouted something after him. Mercer did not turn his head. Seconds later he was round the corner. As soon as he was out of sight he stopped running and started to walk.

"I told you, quite clearly, that you were never to telephone me here, even from a call box, except in an emergency."

"This is an emergency," said Mercer.

"Oh?"

"The attempt on Russ went off half-cocked. It wasn't anything we could have foreseen. A patrol car came along as Bobby let off the first shot. He winged Russ, all right, then the police tumbled out and there was a scrimmage." Mercer could hear the hiss of indrawn breath.

"Bobby. What happened to Bobby?"

"He got off one more shot. It may have been a mistake. You know what it's like, when you're all struggling together and one man has got a gun."

Mercer was drawing out his words, seeming to speak with conscious deliberation. Mr. Henderson, making an effort at self-control, said, "How long ago did this happen?"

"About an hour ago."

"What!"

"Maybe a little more."

"Then why the hell didn't you ring before."

It was the first time Mercer had heard Mr. Henderson swear, almost the first time he had heard him raise his voice. He said apologetically, "I thought it would be more useful if I scouted round a little first, to find out what they were going to do with Bobby."

"Well?"

"I assumed they'd be taking him to Divisional Headquarters Station and they started out in that direction, but they must have got orders on the car radio. They went to Leaman Street Substation instead. It's the smallest of the Divisional Stations, right down at the end of Leaman Passage. Ten minutes after they'd got there, Superintendent Browning arrived. You know, the one they call Bull Browning."

"Why—?" Mr. Henderson seemed to have some difficulty in getting the words out. "Why should they take him there?"

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"Well, it's quiet, you see. If they wanted to give him a bit of a working over. You know how savage they get if a policeman's killed. And Browning's a rough character."

There was such a long silence after this that Mercer thought the man at the other end had gone away. But when Mr. Henderson spoke his voice was under control, cold and clear.

He said, "How many men in that Substation?"

"At this time of night? A duty sergeant and one other man probably. Then there would be the men who brought Bobby in. They *could* still be there. And Browning."

"Yes," said Mr. Henderson. "When we remove Bobby we mustn't forget to deal with Superintendent Browning."

"Remove Bobby?"

"You heard what I said. We shall need two cars and six men. Banks, Loveridge, Manton, and Foxwell. And you. Everyone will be issued shotguns and will, of course, be masked. One car to block the end of Leaman Passage and prevent any interference. The second car to go straight in. Understood?"

"I understand the plan," said Mercer slowly, "and it might work, I suppose. Surprise and brutality. But there's just one thing."

"Well?"

"This isn't like robbing a bank or holding up a payroll. It's a direct attack on the police. I think the boys will do it. But they'd feel happier if you were there yourself."

"Of course I shall be there," said Mr. Henderson. "I shall be in the car that goes in. Foxwell to drive. Banks and Loveridge with me. You and Manton to hold the end of the Lane. We meet at Foxwell's garage exactly one hour from now. So you haven't much time."

"Time enough," said Mercer. And again, after he had replaced the receiver, "Time enough." He stood for a few moments without moving. Anyone watching him would have supposed from the absorbed look on his face that he was pondering some difficult problem in philosophy or ethics.

Leaman Street Station was, as Mercer had said, the smallest Substation in the Division—indeed, one of the smallest in the metropolitan area. It had originally been occupied by the Water Guard, who controlled the barge and lighter traffic in the reaches between the Surrey Docks and the Isle of Dogs. When the Guard had abandoned it, the police had taken it over as a useful staging post and a contact point with their colleagues in the River Police. It was not

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much used. The next economy drive would probably see it abolished.

Sergeant Baxter, who was in charge of the Substation and had been looking forward to a peaceful night, was a badly puzzled man.

First, he had been ordered to empty the cells of prisoners. This had been easy, since their only occupant was a drunken Irish coal heaver. Then he had been told to send home Constable Mulligan, who would normally have manned the telephone and kept him company during the night. Finally, he had been given instructions which mainly involved doing nothing, in circumstances in which he felt certain he ought to be doing a great deal.

However, the instructions had been clear and categorical and had come from Superintendent Browning himself.

The Superintendent had arrived at the Substation on the heels of those instructions. He had gone straight up to the office on the first floor, presumably to conduct the interrogation of the prisoner who had been brought in an hour before and who was going to be charged, so Baxter understood, with shooting at and wounding probationary Detectivé Tolhurst in an affray earlier that evening.

Knowing the Superintendent, Baxter thought he would not like to be in that particular prisoner's shoes. However, the interrogation had appeared to proceed quietly. He could hear the rumble of voices from the upper room, and the only request which had come down had been for a cup of tea. Since the tea had gone up he had heard nothing at all. Taking a soft line to start with, thought Baxter.

It was while he was thinking this that he heard a car coming down the lane. It went past the Substation, turned, and came back.

Three men came into the Charge Room. They were all wearing stocking masks. The tall thin man in front had an automatic pistol, an Army issue .455, thought Baxter, who was something of an expert on firearms. The two men behind, who looked to him like typical South Bank toughs, carried shotguns.

"Come away from that telephone," said the thin man. "Sit over there, on the floor. Behave and you won't get hurt."

Educated voice.

Baxter did what he was told. One of the shotgun merchants took post in the street doorway. The thin man, followed, it seemed to him slightly reluctantly, by the second, disappeared upstairs. Baxter watched them go with mixed feelings. The man in the doorway was also nervous. He seemed much more intent on watching the street than the Charge Room. But for his instructions, Baxter would have liked to have made a dive for his legs.

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It was while he was thinking about this that there came a single shot from upstairs.

When Mr. Henderson entered the upstairs room he saw, to his surprise, that there was only one man there. It was a bulky, red-faced man, with angry blue eyes, who was sitting on the edge of the table, swinging one leg. He guessed it was Superintendent Browning.

Mr. Henderson said, "I have come to relieve you of your prisoner."

Browning continued to swing his leg.

"And I've no time for argument. If you don't take me straight to wherever you're holding him, I shall be forced to shoot you."

Browning said, without moving, "Your boy friend's not here. He's half a mile away by now."

"You're lying. He is here."

"He *was* here," said Browning. "But we've finished with him. He's tucked up in bed, in a nice cell at headquarters. He wasn't very brave."

Mr. Henderson took a step forward and said, "You damn—"

"Cool it. We didn't have to lay a finger on him. He spilt all he knew in double quick time. It's already been typed and signed."

"Now I know you're lying. Lying *and* bluffing. He wouldn't open his mouth, whatever you did to him. And I still think he's here. I'll count down to five. No more. Five—"

"You're in dead trouble," said Browning calmly. "All of you. Who's that character behind you with the rabbit gun? It looks like Banks. Can't you make him see some sense, Banks? You're finished. You're blown. There are forty men round this station now."

"Four—three—"

"Look out of the window if you don't believe me."

Banks took a hesitant step toward the window. At that moment a great many things happened at once. There was a crash of glass from the street. A shotgun went off. Banks grabbed Mr. Henderson by the arm and started to say something. Browning had slid off the table and was coming steadily toward Mr. Henderson, who shook off Banks's hand. The gun he was holding went off. The next moment the room seemed to be full of policemen.

First in was a massive and unmistakable figure in a tight blue suit.

Detective Chief Superintendent Morrissey said, "That'll be all for now. Give me that gun."

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Mr. Henderson surrendered his gun without a word. Banks had already done so.

"That really turned out very nice," said Morrissey. He was sitting on one end of the bed in a cell at Leaman Street Station. Mercer was sitting on the other end. "Tolhurst picked up the worst wound—bang through the upper arm. Cut an artery. Lucky the boys knew what to do or he might have bled to death. Russ got one in the calf. Bull was the best off of the lot—only nicked his sleeve."

"We were lucky, too," said Mercer. "Lucky he fired I mean. It'll add five years to his sentence."

Morrissey considered the prospect with satisfaction. He said, "Get him up in front of Maxwell or Bligh and he'll be lucky not to get life. All the same, I never thought we'd draw him out. Did you really believe it was going to work? That he'd come out like a mixture between Sir Galahad and the Lone Ranger to rescue his boy friend."

"It was a chance," said Mercer. He sounded very tired. "The only chance there was. He'd got the whole thing so sewn up that we'd never have connected him, in his bijou residence, with the sharp end down here. I don't believe you'll do it even now—without Bobby talking. I don't suppose he has?"

"Not a word—yet," said Morrissey.

"Love's a great thing," said Mercer. He yawned uncontrollably.

"The next point," said Morrissey, "is what are we going to do with you? I think you'll have to stand trial with the others. We'll get you out quietly as soon as the trial's over. Then I think you ought to go abroad for a bit. Any ideas?"

"Pakistan? Shallini would like to see her family again. Do you think the treasury will stand it?"

"I don't know whether they will or not," said Morrissey, "but they bloody well ought to."

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a *NEW* short story by

JON L. BREEN

"Best horse I ever owned, best horse I ever saw, best horse I ever heard of" . . .

MATCH RACE

by *JON L. BREEN*

I'll never forget the sound of that gunshot. It was so loud and so final. I hear it in my dreams.

But let me start at the beginning.

When I die, they can put three words on my tombstone: He Owned Assertive. In fact, I owned and bred Assertive. He was conceived and foaled on my farm. I was there the chilly morning he was dropped. We didn't know then what a big event we were witnessing, but I had high hopes from the beginning for a mating of Big Wind, a speedy middle-distance horse, and Little Louella, a champion mare who could run all day.

I was there to see him broken, too. I gave him his name. I was the one who laid down the law that he would not run as a two-year-old. I saw the big rangy chestnut as classics material, and I didn't want to break him down. How Sandra would throw that back at me later on, but that's getting ahead of the story.

At the time we nominated Assertive for the Triple Crown races, he hadn't made his first start yet, and the trainer, Curt Mobley, didn't see the quality in the colt that I did. He thought I was throwing money down the drain. I had a feeling about Assertive, though.

Even if you don't know anything about horseracing, you'll remember that year. Assertive didn't make his first start until January of his three-year-old season, but a scant month later he was co-favorite for the Kentucky Derby. There were two big three-year-olds that winter, Assertive and Royal Challenge. Royal Challenge,

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a compactly built picture-postcard black colt, ran out on the west coast, winning the Santa Anita and everything else in sight. We ran in Florida, won the Flamingo, then went up to New York and ran off with the Wood Memorial, beating a whole different field of colts.

By the time the bugle blew at Churchill Downs in Louisville, with a crowd of sentimental spectators weeping over "My Old Kentucky Home," everybody figured the Derby was a two-horse race between Assertive and Royal Challenge. We were undefeated and the other colt had lost only once, early in his two-year-old year.

One thing that made me happy was my wife Sandra. She had never cared much for horse racing when we were first married. She said it was because she loved animals, and she saw horse racing as a form of institutionalized cruelty. We were forcing those poor nags to do things they didn't necessarily want to do, never mind the fact that that's what they were bred for in the first place.

Anyway, Assertive changed her. She really got attached to the big colt, and the more races he won, the more interested she got. She got so involved in following his races and going down to the barn to pat his nose and feed him carrots that for a few months she almost forgot to spend up to the limit on her credit cards.

I should have been grateful that we finally had something to share besides bed and my money, but I have this self-destructive streak that made me keep picking fights with her. I told her, it doesn't make racing any less cruel that we've got the favorite for the Kentucky Derby. You'd have thought I knew what was coming.

But this story isn't about Sandra, damn it, it's about Assertive. Best horse I ever owned, best horse I ever saw, best horse I ever heard of. I had a guy tell me once that Phar Lap was better, and the guy had only seen Phar Lap run one race 50 years ago. Really dumb.

Anyway, we both came up to the Derby just fine, our colt and the other one. It was such a two-horse contest that only three others ran, and they were left about 20 lengths behind at the finish. Assertive got a great ride from Al Sutcliffe and won by a nose, the closest finish in the history of the Derby. So we all packed up and moved on to Pimlico for the Preakness.

Except for the fact that the Preakness is a sixteenth of a mile shorter in distance and they play "Maryland, My Maryland" during the post parade, it was practically identical to the Derby. One other slight variation was that this time Royal Challenge beat Assertive

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by a nose. You could say the two of them were kind of well-matched. But I knew—I mean, I *knew*—that at the longer distance of the Belmont Stakes, a mile and a half, the blood of his mamma Little Louella would tell and Assertive would leave Royal Challenge way back in the ruck. You could tell from looking at his bloodlines that Royal Challenge was strictly a middle-distance horse, with a mile and a quarter his outside limit.

And then they ducked us in the Belmont.

Yeah, they ducked us. I know there was some kind of report in the paper that Royal Challenge had a virus or something, but we weren't fooled. They were afraid to run against us. I said so in the papers and they got mad, but it was true and everybody knew it.

Everybody but my wife. Sandra said they were right not to run Royal Challenge if he was sick. Poor little horse.

"He wasn't sick," I told her. "That was just an excuse. Besides, in an event as big as the Belmont, you don't let a little cough stop you. I mean, would it keep John Havlicek out of the NBA playoffs or Johnny Bench out of the World Series?"

"They're volunteers," she snapped back. Her old anti-racing bias was coming back. "Would you run Assertive if he was sick?"

"Well, I wouldn't let a little cough keep him out of the Belmont Stakes."

"What was all that talk last year about not running him too much too early? Where's the great humanitarian now?"

"I saved him then so I could run him now," I answered simply, and it sounded quite logical to me. "Then he was a kid. Now he's a pro. I treat my horses fine, but I'm not going to get sentimental about them. This is a business."

Anyway, Royal Challenge didn't run in the Belmont, and we lost a chance to prove we were the better horse. Assertive won all by himself, ten lengths in front of the rest of the field, and they weren't plow horses either. Then, of course, people started talking about some kind of a tie-breaker between Assertive and Royal Challenge. You see, now that Royal Challenge didn't have to worry about running a mile and a half, he was okay again. Convenient, huh?

So they started talking match race, and one of those tracks out on the west coast offered to put up a couple hundred grand for a race just between the two of them, with me and the other owner putting up another hundred grand each as a side bet.

I knew to prove our point we'd have to race. But I was a little coy about it at first, I must admit. At first I insisted that the distance

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of the race had to be a mile and a half, to settle what wasn't settled in the Belmont. But they were talking about the so-called "American classic distance" of a mile and a quarter. I said we'd already proved we were the best at a mile and a quarter, but they pointed out that Assertive had won the Derby by the merest whisker, and I had to agree.

At this point I figured everybody knew we'd leave Royal Challenge far behind in a long race. If we could prove Assertive was better at the shorter distance, especially on the other colt's home ground, then everybody would know he was best. I finally agreed to the race.

That's where my wife Sandra comes back into it. Somebody, it seemed, had put a bug in her about match races.

"You can't run Assertive in any match race," she told me over breakfast one morning.

"What do you mean?"

"You can't do it. It's too dangerous."

"Dangerous? If two jockeys can't keep out of each other's way with the whole track to themselves—why, it's safer than a big field."

"That's not what I mean. It's the way they run match races. In every match race," she said, talking with authority as if she'd memorized it out of a textbook, "both horses go all out from the beginning, running as fast and as hard as they can, because that's how a match race is run. In every famous match race the horse that gets the lead at the beginning is the winner. Swaps and War Admiral, Seabiscuit and Alsab—"

"Wait a minute. You've got 'em mixed up. Seabiscuit beat War Admiral in a match race. Alsab beat Whirlaway. Nashua beat Swaps."

"What difference does it make? In every case the horse that got the lead at the beginning was the winner. Right?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's right. So what?"

"Going all out at the beginning puts an unnatural strain on the horses' legs. They do have such skinny legs, you have to admit, to support those big heavy bodies. It's even more of a strain on a big horse like Assertive."

"Sandra, I don't know who the hell you've been talking to, but—"

"Do you remember that great filly, Ruffian?"

"Yeah, but I didn't know you did. What about her?"

"She broke a leg in a match race with Honest Pleasure and had to be destroyed."

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"It was Foolish Pleasure."

"So what? She's still just as dead. And it was all because she put an unnatural strain on her legs running all out at the beginning of a race. That doesn't happen in an ordinary race."

"The big expert! Look, I'll run the racing stable and you spend the money, okay?"

Somebody had been filling her full of nonsense, probably somebody close to my stable, and I wondered who it was. What bothered me more than the propaganda she was being fed was the fact that the source was probably doing other things with her as well. I'd had the feeling for some time that she was cheating on me, and I didn't like it. I wouldn't claim that I had some great romantic love for Sandra. I just don't like somebody using my things when I'm not around. It was the way I'd feel if somebody was taking Assertive out at night to run him in county-fair race meets.

So who could the bleeding heart boy friend be? I knew my trainer, Curt Mobley, didn't hold with those opinions, and he was a happily married guy who didn't mind talking to Sandra and answering her questions but never gave her a second look as a woman.

Then a more likely suspect presented himself. A couple of days before the match race, after Curt and the colt had already flown out to the coast to get ready, I had a little talk with our jockey, Al Sutcliffe. He's one of the best, I have to admit—he has a clock in his head. But I was surprised to find he didn't agree with the strategy Curt and I had agreed on for the match race with Royal Challenge. "I say we lay back, off Royal Challenge, let him burn himself out," he said.

"Al," I told him, "that's crazy. He won't burn himself out. If we don't go after him early, we'll never catch him. We have to run with him, right out of the gate."

"They'll be expecting that."

"They'll be expecting that because it's the only way to run a match race—flat out from the beginning. Look at your historic match races. The horse that gets the early lead is the winner."

"Look, if you wanna tell me how to ride—"

"Hey, I can't tell you how to ride, Al. The strategy of the race is between you and Curt. I'm just giving you my opinion."

"Okay," said Sutcliffe.

That was good enough for me. I knew Curt agreed with my strategy. Sutcliffe was too good a rider not to do it the smart way when the time came.

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But the sentiments he'd expressed made me wonder if he was the guy Sandra was spending time with. He wasn't married, and they'd had plenty of chances to get to know each other in all the towns we'd run Assertive.

I didn't like the idea, but I decided not to say anything to Sutcliffe about it till after the match race. He was the best rider around, and I didn't want to get him upset over anything before the race.

On Friday morning, the day before the race and the day Sandra and I were set to fly out to California, I got a call from Curt Mobley. He said everything was okay, that a slight puffiness in the one ankle we'd noticed earlier in the week was about cleared up. That sounded fine to me, but unfortunately Sandra was listening in on her bedroom extension and hit the roof after I'd hung up.

"What is this slight puffiness?" she shrieked at me.

"It's nothing."

"Has Assertive got a bad ankle?"

"It's clearing up. It's nothing to keep us from running him."

"Curt sounded worried."

"He's an old woman. He worries too much. Dozens of horses run every day in worse shape than Assertive is in. He's fine."

"I can't believe you're the same guy—"

"I know, I know! The same guy who wouldn't run him at two because I didn't want to break him down. Look, I know horses. I've worked with them all my life. Six months ago you didn't know Secretariat from Trigger and thought a fetlock was something that went on a barn door. The colt is all right, I tell you. We've got him for a racehorse, not a watchdog. I know he's fragile, but he's not made of glass. He's running in the match race, and if you don't like it, you can stay right here."

"I'm coming," she said. "You can't keep me away. But if anything happens to that colt I'll leave you!"

"You'll leave my money. Don't forget that."

I turned around and stomped off to the bathroom. I could have accused her about Al Sutcliffe then and there, but I decided it could wait till after the race. We flew to Los Angeles that afternoon, together and almost not talking to each other.

Up came the day of the race.

The day of the gunshot.

National TV for it, you'll remember, and by that time we'd have had a national network on our necks if we'd made any decision not to run. The ankle still looked a little suspicious, enough for Curt to

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look a little gray, but not enough for the track vet to advise us to scratch our horse.

After saddling Assertive, Curt came back to our box to watch the race. He was worried-looking and not too communicative. As for Sandra, she'd hardly said a word all morning, quiet and sullen and sulky, not excited like she'd usually been when Assertive was going to run. As the two best horses in America walked to the post, people I knew in racing (and some I didn't) were coming by the box to wish me luck. But the two people there with me, my trainer and my wife, the two closest people in any horseman's life, wouldn't talk to me, it seemed, or even look at me.

I'd asked Curt if he and Al had agreed on our strategy and he nodded his head. Sutcliffe worried me. He'd been known to refuse to ride a horse he thought was unsound, even taking himself off the mount at the starting gate. He wouldn't dare to do that in a race this big, on national TV—the little guy couldn't be that principled.

I had confidence Assertive would do fine. I just hoped his jockey believed in him the way I did.

The tension built up as they were loaded in the gate. The start was *so* important. Both jockeys should be looking to the break as they would in a quarter horse race.

"The flag is up," said the track announcer. I held my breath. "They're off!"

The start was not good for Assertive. He didn't seem to break alertly at all, and Royal Challenge immediately opened up two lengths on him. I groaned.

"What's Sutcliffe up to?" I said to Curt. "Didn't you tell him to go right to the lead?"

"Sure, sure, how else do you run a match race? Maybe the colt's hurting."

"He's fine!" I snapped back.

The first time past the stands, with Royal Challenge leading and not having to go very fast, Sutcliffe suddenly seemed to wake up and decide to join the race. He gunned Assertive, even giving him a whack with the whip. The colt responded as he always did and drew even with Royal Challenge. I stood up and yelled encouragement. Sandra stayed in her seat, looking pale.

From there to the finish the two horses were never more than a neck apart. Royal Challenge would have the lead for an eighth of a mile, then Assertive would get his head in front. Now they were peeling off fast fractions, both of them running all out. It seemed

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incredible that neither one would crack.

Down the stretch they came, fragile legs pounding the dirt. And when they crossed the finish line in front of us, I for one did not need photo finish. Assertive had won it by a good head.

I turned to Sandra, expecting to see the delight I felt reflected on her face. Just as I turned to her, she gave a little exclamation of horror, and I turned back to the track. Assertive had come to a halt just a few yards past the finish. Sutcliffe had dismounted, and the colt was standing there on three legs.

Sandra muttered, "The little swine," an endearment she usually reserved for me. This time I was pretty sure she intended it for Al Sutcliffe. His competitive instincts had got the better of him, and he had double-crossed her.

Curt was already running down to the track. Sandra followed him without a glance at me. I was thinking about the money I had won and how I'd proved my horse was the best and how it would be a good idea not to run Assertive again. His right foreleg didn't look too good dangling above the ground. It was the stud farm for him, I thought. I was thinking about syndication figures. Actually I was in shock.

It may sound callous, but I'm a businessman, and I was thinking in business terms, maybe as a kind of defense against realizing what the dangling leg of my three-year-old champion might really mean.

Around the edges of my brain I was vaguely aware that what my wife Sandra had tried to do with her highly persuasive body amounted to trying to get Sutcliffe to throw the race to save the colt. But when the race got started, Sutcliffe found he had to go for it. I had to admire that. I didn't like the idea of his sleeping with my wife, but I can be objective about such things.

So I sat there alone in my box, sort of numbed by events, hardly conscious of the hubbub going on around me. Living in the past really—Churchill Downs, Pimlico, Belmont—reviewing the highlights of my great colt's career and all the fame and money he'd won me.

And then I heard the gunshot and looked up, and all the implications of the day's events came home to me in that instant.

The vet shooting the horse? No, they don't do it that way any more. They use a hypodermic needle. And anyway, Assertive was saved for stud duty. The vets can do wonders these days.

No, it was my wife Sandra, shooting the jockey.

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a *NEW* Red Salter story by

JOHN STORM ROBERTS

Red Salter, the Black jive pianist, is back, as hip a detective as he was in his debut in our issue of November 1978. This time it's the case of an anonymous note "made out of words cut from newspapers." The note was sent to a well-known "quick-on-the-shutter" news photographer and it read: YOU GOING TO DIE . . .

THE CLUE OF THE CLICK

by JOHN STORM ROBERTS

Being I was early for my date with Hirshfeld, and heavy hitters are never on time anyway, I dropped by Rosie's on my way home. She was polishing her new espresso machine again.

"Coffee, Red?"

"Unh-unh, love. Kinda thirsty. Gimme a soda." Fact is, I hate espresso coffee, but I wasn't telling Rosie that.

Just then her nephew came in, toting one of those radio-cassette machines kids seem to think they'll catch cold without.

"That Eezyprint order ready?"

Rosie pushed my glass at me and built two chicken salads to go while I stared at myself in the wall mirror and drank soda. By the time I was through, the kid was gone and Rosie was back to her polishing.

"How's the nephew working out?" I asked as I paid her.

"Fine. He's a real nice kid. Handy, too, living upstairs. Means I get to go home early now and then."

"Little gloomy, ain't he?"

"Yeah, well, his dad's death didn't help none, especially being all over the papers."

"Dad's death? I must've been on tour. What happened?"

"There was a fire upstairs. He jumped out of a sixth-floor window. Sure you don't want coffee?"

"Positive, Rosie. I have a date with a photographer."

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Hirshfeld wasn't drinking that night, and it didn't seem to suit him. He spilled his soda twice, once onto the rug, and once into my instrument. That bugged me. Pianos don't take kindly to liquids.

"Man, what's the matter with you?" I asked.

He quit dabbing at the keys with his handkerchief and looked at me sideways.

"Somebody tried to kill me last night."

"No kidding! You been shooting the wrong guy's old lady for those centerfolds of yours?"

"I don't know."

I had a couple more wisecracks lined up, but his voice withered them on the vine. So I flipped the light switch and took a closer look at the man.

Hirshfeld was a skinny little guy, and kind of bald, but what he lacked in foxy he usually made up in zip. Usually. That night he was scared.

"First I got this."

He handed me one of those notes you read about, made out of words from newspapers. It didn't mess around.

YOU GOING TO DIE

"That came Saturday. Yesterday evening somebody took a shot at me while I was on my balcony."

"A shot! You sure?"

Hirshfeld took time out from looking like yesterday's lunch to scowl.

"I should be. I've been shot at in Watts, Vietnam, and the Rhodesian bush. The thing missed me by about three inches and took a piece of the brickwork."

"What did the cops say?"

Hirshfeld looked shifty. "I haven't told them."

"Why the hell not?"

"The fact is, I had—have—a drinking problem," Hirshfeld said confidingly. Alcoholics blow my mind the way they always think nobody knows.

"So?"

"Apparently I went to the police a couple of months ago and made a complaint that people were trying to kill me. They put me in the drunk tank and I wound up in Freeport Hospital. I only got out on Friday. I've been in and out of blackouts for a week, and I haven't the faintest idea where I've gone or what I did."

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"Or why anybody might be gunning for you, hunh?"

I hadn't known things had got that bad, but then I didn't know Hirshfeld too well. I'd met him in Nam, when he was an agency news photographer, and we saw each other a couple of times back in the Big Apple. Then he got famous and we lost touch for a while.

We'd run across each other again on Christopher Street two days earlier, and I'd hooked into him with a motive. I was playing at a new soulfood restaurant on Bleecker Street and hustling every man and his mother to come pack the house.

Hirshfeld seemed to like the notion. In fact, he was so chummy we wound up with a supper date before the gig. I'd been surprised, being he was a busy guy these days, but now I understood. Ex-drunks who want to stay ex- for long need a whole new set of buddies.

Hirshfeld being a health nut, we ate at an organic joint called The Midnight Mushroom. Things didn't exactly flow, though he brightened up momentarily when I asked why he always carried a camera slung around his neck. Seems he hankered after his quick-on-the-shutter photojournalism past.

"I've sold some off-the-cuff material—but it's not so much the money." He waved a forkful of spinach salad at me. "Studio work lacks the spontaneity of reportage."

For a while things went easier. Then he turned broody on me again.

"That 'click!' was almost the worst part of it," he said suddenly.

"What 'click'?"

"I didn't tell you?" He looked surprised. "Just after I was shot at, the phone rang. I picked it up, and all I heard was the sound of a camera. Click!"

"Ah, come on! How can you tell that through the noises any phone makes?"

Hirshfeld gave me the hairy eyeball.

"A single-lens reflex isn't your holiday snap Instamatic, you know." Funny guy. He was quite miffed.

For a while he sulked and I ate. Then we got onto other matters, like paying the check and moving on down to the club.

I played my usual brilliant set, the johns ate hearty and applauded lightly, and Hirshfeld took pictures. I got his point about the camera. The thing he was using went off like a slamming door.

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It being a chilly Tuesday, the joint closed around midnight. Hirshfeld was getting jumpy again, so I walked him back to his place, and when we got there he asked me up for coffee. We plodded six flights up to his studio; he unlocked his door and flipped the switch. Then he stopped so suddenly I tailgated him.

You'd need dynamite to do more to that room than somebody had done with venom and bare hands. Everything—*everything*—was on the floor. What was smashable was smashed, what was tearable up was torn up, and what was spillable was spilled.

At first Hirshfeld just stood and looked. Then he sat down on a cane chair with half the seat kicked out of it and looked some more, while I drifted over to his desk, figuring to call the cops. No dial tone.

"I don't want to worry you," I said, "but the phone ain't working."

"Eh? Oh, the answering machine's on. Push that button on the left."

I got through to the precinct house first crack out of the box for once, and told my tale. Then I took a look at Hirshfeld's door while we waited for Mr. Blue. There were two locks on it. One was the kind anybody over the age of ten can open with a credit card, but the other was serious business.

"Did you leave this drop-bolt unlocked?"

Hirshfeld quit staring at the wreckage for a moment.

"Hunh? I doubt it."

"In that case, you been giving away door keys in those blackouts of yours."

There not being too much more to say about that, I went out to the balcony and looked for his bullet scar. Sure enough, there was a chip out of the brickwork near the window. It didn't tell me anything. I put my elbows on the railing and waited for the cops, staring at the entrance to Rosie's and wishing I was in bed.

You could hear Cleanhead coming all the way from the stationhouse. He screeched round the corner like a four-alarm catfight, hit the brake just past the last moment, and swerved the heap into the sidewalk at an angle.

That was to impress the street. Coming into the apartment, he used Tactic B: Cooool. Cleanhead's the local precinct's token soul-brother, but that don't mean I have to love him. I prefer his blue-eyed sidekick, Zits, who is dumb too, but at least he ain't arrogant with it.

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Cleanhead pulled his notebook off his hip as he came in the door, raised one eyebrow at me, which is one of his few talents, and smirked at Hirshfeld.

"Man, you really flipped this time!"

Zits sniggered. That was his role—straight man to Cleanhead. Hirshfeld took it pretty well. He just said he'd been on the wagon ever since he woke up in the tank. Cleanhead didn't look like he bought that, but even he could see Hirshfeld was sober now.

"Anything missing?"

Hirshfeld shrugged. "It's difficult to tell."

Cleanhead looked down and stirred the rubble with his foot.

"Guess so. Any ideas? Girl friends? Girl friends' boy friends? Boy friends' boy friends? Not stepped on no toes at all? C'mon Mr. Hirshfeld, anybody with Red Salter for a friend has to have enemies!"

Zits sniggered.

And so it went. They looked at the locks and poked around a little, and Cleanhead made a few notes along the way. Probably one-liners he didn't want to forget.

"Okay," he said as they left. "Come down to the station and sign a complaint, if you feel like it."

"And have a couple of hours to waste," I said from the corner. Zits didn't snigger.

After that we tackled the mess on the floor. That took a while, because Hirshfeld listed the damage as we went, for the insurance. He picked up the valuable stuff while I piled spilled prints in a stack on the table.

Hirshfeld had done some heavy work in his time. There was a slew of Vietnam photos, and a set featuring what looked like Rhodesian guerillas, and a bunch of firefighters and kids apparently setting light to buildings, along with a gruesome shot of some dude who'd apparently fallen off a roof in flames and was halfway down to meet his Maker.

"Anything in this arson series?"

Hirshfeld shook his head.

"I took 'em at least three years ago."

When we were finally through, Hirshfeld decided he still didn't want to go to bed, and suggested we get some air. Before we left he checked the messages on his answering machine.

There was just one, after a moment of silence with traffic noise behind it.

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CLICK!

Hirshfeld had been right. I still wasn't sure what a single-lens reflex was, but there was no way I could mistake the sound.

Hirshfeld stood staring at the machine until I took him by the elbow and steered him out the door. Then he came to enough to lock up, and we hit the street.

At that time of night the only option to the bars was Rosie's. The place was empty except for her gloomy nephew, who was cleaning the counter, his fancy radio playing. We bought coffee, sat down by a window looking out at a streetful of nothing, and kicked things around under cover of the Top Forty. At least, I did. Hirshfeld just sat and suffered.

"You know," I said, "in real life folks who want to cancel people don't go in for heavy drama like clicking cameras and wrecking the joint. That's just asking for double-locks and heavy security. They keep it simple. Sneak up on you, and *kapow*!"

"Well, what's the idea, then?"

"Scare you, I guess. Give you nightmares."

"But why?"

I shrugged. "Something to do with your work, anyway."

"How come?"

"The camera. The 'click'."

"Maybe. But I don't see that it helps much, with nothing else to go on."

The man's attitude was beginning to bug me. I grabbed my eyeballs before they rolled right into my head with exasperation.

"C'mon, man! Number one, there's a chance you were seen together even if you did meet in a blackout. Number two, whoever we're after has access to a roof looking onto your balcony. Three, it's somebody you gave your keys. And four, he or she carries a camera around; there was traffic noise behind that message on your machine, which means a street phone."

Rosie's nephew had worked his way down the counter toward us, and was staring gloomily out the window.

"Hey, kid, you know anybody around here with a single-lens reflex?"

He jumped.

"Hunh? A what?"

"One of these." Hirshfeld pointed to the camera slung on his chest. The kid shook his head nervously and drifted back up the counter. I grinned at Hirshfeld.

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"Tomorrow we start looking for somebody with all that going for them." Something else struck me. "Somebody who can juggle a camera and a phone receiver, which ain't—"

Then I saw it. Though what I was going to do about it, I didn't know.

I got up and went over to the counter.

"Gotta go home," I said. "How much?"

While he was fooling with the cash register, I picked up the cassette-radio standing beside it.

"Nice box."

"Be careful!"

"Don't worry. I know what I'm doing." I twisted the volume control to high, and pushed the button marked CASSETTE: PLAY.

It played.

CLICK!

The kid dropped a handful of quarters and began backing away from me along the counter.

Hirshfeld jumped to his feet.

"What—?"

"Simple," I said. "Eh, kid? You'd need three hands to juggle a phone and a camera. But a cassette . . . On the telephone, who'd know the difference?"

"But—"

"This building has as good a view of your balcony as anybody could wish, and the kid lives right on the sixth floor."

I turned and looked at Rosie's nephew, who was backed up against a cooler full of sodas.

"Gentleman gave you his keys to make a delivery, eh? That would be a reasonable thing for even a cautious drunk to do."

The kid licked his lips and glanced at the cash register. Hirshfeld pulled a couple of keys out of its open drawer and stared at them like he was hypnotized.

"But—*why*?"

"Remember your Bronx arson series? One of 'em wasn't. One of 'em was the kid's old man on his way to the sidewalk. Rosie told me it was all over the papers. I didn't make the connection up in your room, because I didn't think of a photo."

"Geez," Hirshfeld said. "I remember! I was on my balcony. I only had time for the one shot, but it was a damn fine photo. It made the front page of the *Post*." He was looking at the kid now, but the kid was staring out the window, shivering.

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"A damn fine photo," I said. "Right place, right time, right angle. I guess the whole city admired it. Except the kid. Because to him that wasn't a damn fine photo. That was his dad. Eh, kid?"

Rosie's nephew ran for the back door—and found she'd locked it for the night before leaving.

I walked slowly over to him.

"Easy, kid. We don't mean you no harm. Eh, Hirshfeld?"

"Yeah," Hirshfeld said. "I mean, no!"

Rosie's nephew stood for a second backed up against the heavy door. I stayed where I was, to give him room to think.

He didn't think. He broke for the emergency stairs.

"Phone the cops. And an ambulance," I hollered to Hirshfeld as I went after him. "And stay by the door in case he doubles back."

The kid was maybe 16 and skinny as a greyhound. I was 15 years older. If he'd locked himself in his apartment, that'd have been the ball game. But he still wasn't thinking. He kept going up to the roof.

Once he got there, he had no place to go. There was a filling station on one side of the building and a 22-story apartment block on the other.

I stood in the doorway while he backed toward the parapet.

"Keep away," he said. "Keep away from me." His voice was flat, and it was too dark for me to see his face.

"Kid, nobody wants to hurt you." I had no idea what to do, except keep talking till somebody showed up who did know what to do.

"Don't call me kid."

"Okay." I tried to sound reasonable. "What's your name? Mine's John Salter. People call me Red."

"I know your name."

His voice bothered me. It sounded like one of those recordings that tell you nobody's home.

"Fine. But I don't know yours." He ignored that.

Somewhere in the distance I could hear a siren. A squad car. The kid shifted around and took another look down. The height would have turned me to jelly, but it didn't seem to bother him. I got the notion he'd spent a lot of time on the roof. Watching Hirshfeld. Brooding. I started to have a bad feeling.

"Whose was the gun?" I made it as casual as possible.

"My dad's."

The siren was getting closer, and he was still staring down into

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the intersection. I took a step forward, trying to look like I was easing an aching muscle. That brought his attention back to me fast.

"Stay where you are!"

I put my back up against the frame of the doorway and slid down onto my hunkers.

"Listen." I tried to sound brisk and sensible, neither of which I was feeling. "You were upset, and I can dig that. It must of hurt bad. But the man didn't mean no harm. He just didn't—"

If I'd ever had his attention, I'd lost it again. The siren came round the corner and died as the squad car slowed. About time, I thought. This needs an expert. That led to another thought. Dear God, let it not be Cleanhead!

It wouldn't have mattered. The kid took another squint down, and looked back at me.

"Oh, no," he said, in that flat tinny voice. Then he let himself roll backward and vanished.

I made it to the parapet before he reached the sidewalk, but I didn't look at him. I knew the shape he'd be in, eight fast stories down. I looked at Hirshfeld, who was standing in the middle of the road with his camera to his eye.

By the time I reached him, he was taking the film out of the thing. He glanced at me kind of sheepish.

"I didn't set out to do that. I guess it was just automatic, just habit." His voice was bewildered. He held out the cassette.

"Here. Throw it away, will you?"

"It's your film, man. You throw it away."

"Yeah. Okay, I will." He hesitated, then turned and walked into the lobby of his building.

That was the last I saw of Hirshfeld. But it wasn't the last I saw of his work. He made the front page of the *Post* with the kid, just like he had with his dad.

I guess it was like he said. Just habit.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

NEDRA TYRE

Perhaps we should warn you about this newest story by Nedra Tyre. There is no crime—or is there? (It would be easy to imagine one in the background.) There is no detection—or is there? (Kate certainly makes deductions at the end.) There is no mystery—no, that isn't true. There is plenty of mystery—so much that some of it will linger in your memory long after you have read this fascinating story . . .

THE PERFECT JEWEL

by NEDRA TYRE

Kate Jones couldn't wait until Sunday to make her usual long-distance call to her mother.

Of course her mother would imagine disaster when she heard Kate's voice in the middle of the week, and then would be ecstatic when she learned that Kate had been made executive vice president of Adams Realty and Trust Company.

The news was official. At noon the business editors of both local papers had interviewed Kate and had been invited to the luncheon in her honor in the executive dining room.

Kate had earned the promotion. For three years she had worked hard, had taken night courses at the University Law School, and had enrolled in various real-estate seminars in the downtown college's Department of Business Administration. She had passed the very stiff state examinations. She had built up contacts. Above all, she had a talent for dealing in property.

Her mother answered the telephone and there was the expected tremolo in her voice when she realized Kate was on the line. Then she bubbled, "Congratulations, darling. How perfectly marvelous. I wish your father were here but he's playing in a bridge tournament. He'll call the minute he gets home."

There was silence, and then both women said at the same time, "It wouldn't have been possible without Miss Smith."

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"Truly, mama, I owe it all to Miss Smith. There's no doubt about it."

"She's a marvel," her mother had said. "She's what your great-aunt Cecilia would call a jewel."

Kate owed everything to Miss Smith. Her jewel. Her treasure. None of it could have happened if she hadn't found Miss Smith to take care of the children and the house. Not that "found" was exactly the right word. Miss Smith had simply been there on the front doorsteps.

"You've come to see about the ad, haven't you?" Kate had asked. Kate was terrified that Miss Smith, like all the other housekeeper applicants, would get away from her.

"I'm Kate Jones," she said, and Miss Smith had hesitated and then had answered, "I'm Mary Smith."

Now, for a little while as Kate sat sipping the bedtime pot of tea that Miss Smith had brought up a few minutes after the telephone call, she wanted to review everything. It was a suitable moment, after the day's excitement and fulfillment, to think of the shock and sorrow Joe's death had brought, and of her first frustrated attempts to get and hold a job.

Had Kate and Janney, the youngest child, contrived Joe's death? Was murder what members of families do to each other? Or was Joe killed by his own chagrin over one slight lapse?

Kate admired her husband. The darling man had her and five children to support and he was serious about being a good husband and father. He was courtly toward Kate and the three girls—never a birthday missed or a Valentine's Day, and there were bouquets at Easter, and he was sympathetic during any illness or upset. He was equally devoted to his sons. He took them fishing. He played baseball with them. For the entire family there were backpack trips in spring and early fall, and winter skiing holidays.

It was nothing less than heroic that Joe had found the time and energy for a bit of dalliance. Kate was proud of him for that. Most of all, she marveled that Joe had the energy. As for herself, if Lancelot, Casanova, Byron, and the sexiest and most dashing film and television stars had offered themselves to her she would have had to say, "No, thanks, it's rest and quiet I need after caring for five children."

Joe's voice had sounded strange or constrained, not at all like himself, and he had cleared his throat and said Kate. He usually

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called her darling. The fact was that he couldn't come home to dinner. There was an emergency at the office. Joe had never missed an evening meal—not once. And she thought of all her friends who had rather welcomed their husbands' absence on occasion and had enjoyed makeshift meals of franks and beans or chili.

Well, there wouldn't be such scrappy fare for Kate and the children. Birthday money from her brother had been burning a hole in her pocket and now was the time to splurge. She and the children would go to the poshest restaurant in town and order whatever appealed to them without glancing at the right-hand side of the menu where the prices were listed. They had dressed in their finest and the waiters had made much of the children.

Then when the meal was almost over, Janney had gone to the next table to say hello to the parents of one of her friends. Before Kate had realized it Janney had wandered upstairs to the private dining rooms and had discovered Joe with a young woman. Janney had let out a howl that resounded throughout the restaurant and had screamed for Joe to come down and sit with his family.

Kate had wanted to wring Janney's neck. Joe had earned his little fling and it wasn't fair that Janney had made him feel ashamed.

Joe had been so chagrined that he never did recover. It was just like the poor unlucky darling to be caught on what Kate was sure was his first small transgression, and it wasn't fair that Kate had selected by chance the same restaurant for a spendthrift treat that Joe had chosen for a rendezvous. From that mortifying evening Joe began to overwork and to lose sleep, and not many weeks later at a business conference he had collapsed from a fatal heart attack.

He had left ample insurance to take care of the children and their education. Kate could have managed well enough. If there had been an emergency Kate's parents would have helped gladly, and her brother was well-to-do and generous. Money and necessity weren't Kate's spur and goad. She passionately wanted to work. She was determined to have a career. She must make a place for herself, and a solid one, in the business world.

That ambition had kept her the victim of faltering housekeepers until Miss Smith had arrived.

Janney was the problem.

Kate sometimes thought that Janney was a brat whom she would have avoided, well, like the plague, if she hadn't been her

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own child. It wasn't that she didn't love Janney. Kate would have done anything for her. But Kate didn't like Janney very much. Kate and the other children would have been fond of each other even if they hadn't been kin.

"That little one is a handful," one of the housekeepers had said—she had lasted three days. "I called her Janney, which is what everyone else calls her. She said she wasn't going to answer me until I called her by her right name, Jannette. I said I'd call her Your Royal Highness Miss Jones if it improved her manners any. The others act like real little ladies and gentlemen. No trouble at all. But that Janney is just too much."

One housekeeper who had stayed a week said, "Janney is too big for her britches. She's a lot more trouble than the other four put together. I'd beg before I'd take care of a child like her."

The longest anyone stayed was a month, and during that month Kate's ambition soared. She loved her job. But the dismal day soon arrived when the helper washed her hands of the whole lot of them because of Janney, and Kate had to quit work.

She didn't give up hope of finding another housekeeper. She went to employment agencies. She enlisted the help of friends. Desperate, she had even accosted friendly, motherly-looking persons on the street to ask if they wouldn't consider working as her housekeeper.

Then there was the miraculous day when Miss Smith appeared on the doorsteps.

After having been badgered by so many prospective and quickly fleeing housekeepers, Kate was almost ready to lie about the number of children. But there was nothing to be done about how many there were.

"I've five children."

Miss Smith had smiled. "Large families are nice."

Kate felt like giggling hysterically. "The two boys are the oldest and there are three girls. Andrew, Mark, Elizabeth, Nan, and Jannette—who's called Janney." Kate's throat tightened at the mention of Janney.

"What nice names they have," Miss Smith said.

Kate must not let Miss Smith escape. She had grasped her elbow, locked the front door behind them, and had guided her down the hall and upstairs to show her the house. Miss Smith had responded with appreciative remarks as Kate had led her from room to room, and she had lingered in the playroom which was

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now Janney's sole domain. Miss Smith had looked at all the dolls, and then she had gone to the front window and had stayed there as if what was in it or the view from it fascinated her. When she turned to look at Kate there was a rather dazed expression on her face, and she had said she would take the job.

Kate braced herself for an exorbitant demand for pay, but Miss Smith was unconcerned about the amount of her wages. "Whatever you think is fair will be fine with me," she said.

From bitter experience Kate realized that she and the children were much more on trial than Miss Smith, and so she didn't ask for references. Besides, references meant nothing. High praise as often as not was given only because people wanted to get rid of someone. All the same, it could be risky not to ask for references. But after Miss Smith's first day, Kate had dismissed the absurdity of asking for them. Who on earth could praise Miss Smith sufficiently?

"I want to do things your way," Miss Smith had said. "Let me watch you, Mrs. Jones, and follow you around and see how you do everything."

From that first day Miss Smith couldn't be faulted. She didn't talk about herself. She was eager to please but in no way servile. She didn't indulge the children, and she expected them to behave and to do their chores and homework and eat everything on their plates. She was firm but fair and very gentle.

Before Miss Smith's second week was out, Kate had found a challenging and fascinating job and everything was fine—if only Janney would behave.

The weeks and then the months only added to Miss Smith's perfection. She was never sick. Her endurance was phenomenal. Not once had Kate been called at the office to come home for a household emergency or because of a child's sudden illness. Whatever happened, Miss Smith handled it with dispatch and efficiency.

She was perfect with the children. Getting them to breakfast at the same time had been impossible for Kate. Now when Miss Smith called Kate to breakfast at seven thirty the children were already seated at the dining table. Even Janney conformed. When their various rivalries sometimes surfaced, it took only a raised eyebrow or a delicate shaking of Miss Smith's head for serenity to be restored.

Kate would relish her egg done just right, and drink her coffee of the exact strength she liked, and marvel that Miss Smith could

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know that grape jelly on that particular morning would somehow be even more delicious than the usual strawberry jam, and she would crunch away at the toast thickly spread with whipped butter and say to herself, "It can't last. It won't last. I must enjoy it while I can."

During the first months of Miss Smith's stay, Kate had literally jumped at every telephone call that came to her desk, sure, as with all those other housekeepers, that she was being ordered home; but that did not happen—the messages and communications were strictly business. Unwilling to believe that Miss Smith could be so completely in charge, Kate began to drop by the house when she was in the vicinity. Miss Smith invariably welcomed her and offered coffee or lunch or other refreshment appropriate to the hour. Janney, home earlier than the older children who were engaged in after-school activities or part-time jobs, would be in the playroom deeply occupied with her dolls, and sometimes Miss Smith would be with Janney and each would have a family of dolls surrounding her.

Before the year was out, Kate no longer made pop calls at home. There was no reason for her to be at all concerned about household matters. Miss Smith was in commendable control of everything.

Miss Smith had qualities of simplicity and purity that made her unique and even mysterious—not that she acted mysteriously. On the contrary, she seemed the most guileless person in the world, and when Kate asked anything personal Miss Smith shrugged as if she really didn't know.

Kate hadn't any idea how old Miss Smith was. She could have been in her thirties or even in her fifties, but when she played games or cards with the children she looked even younger than Janney.

One day Kate had asked Miss Smith the name of her next of kin. "I haven't any kin at all," she said. Kate had suggested that she must have a good friend, someone to get in touch with in case of an emergency. "I've just myself, Mrs. Jones."

"You have us, Miss Smith. Everyone in this house depends on you. We couldn't get along without you."

And it was true.

Once, during the early months of Miss Smith's employment, Kate, trying to find a fault, had taken exception to Miss Smith's name. Mary Smith—it sounded equivocal, an assumed name that

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had been adopted when one was up to something. Kate had mentioned her doubts to her mother, who said, "I don't think that anyone named Kate Jones has any reason to be suspicious of someone named Mary Smith."

And of course her mother was right.

Kate hoped that sometime Miss Smith would talk about herself.

As a matter of fact, there wasn't anything that Miss Smith could have told Kate. She didn't know anything about herself, and there wasn't anyone she could ask.

Somebody had led her down a long corridor to an office where she had never been before and the man at the desk had told her it was time she was leaving, that she had stayed much longer than she should have, and there was nothing wrong with her. She had got into a car with two other people and they had let her out in the biggest place she had ever seen. She had no idea what to do or where to go.

She had wandered in and out of stores and had sat in a bus station, and then she remembered being so hungry she couldn't stand it, and she had gone into a place where two men were sitting at a counter drinking coffee. She stood as far away from them as she could, and when a man wearing a white cap came toward her to take her order she told him she was hungry but didn't seem to have any money and she wondered if he would give her something to eat, just anything. He had said sure and had asked her how she wanted her hamburger. She had frowned. No one had ever asked before how she wanted anything. She was bewildered and shook her head, and he asked if she liked onions and she nodded.

While the hamburger was cooking he gave her some coffee and set a little container of cream beside it. After she had finished the hamburger he took the plate and wiped the place beneath it and then put a piece of apple pie in front of her. Then he took it back. She had known it was too much to expect, but he set it down again and it was topped with two huge scoops of vanilla ice cream. She'd never tasted anything so good and she tried to make it last. When she had finished every crumb she told the man she wanted to do something to repay him—wash dishes or mop the floor or take out the garbage; but he said he'd already done that and she was welcome to the food.

She had left, and had walked a long way and found herself on a street that had large houses and nice big lawns. She had glanced

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up at a window and was astonished to see the prettiest little face she had ever seen and yet so like that other one. She looked so long she knew the people wouldn't like it if she stayed there gawking and loitering. A soft voice had called out to her and said, "You've come about the ad, haven't you? I'm so glad to see you."

The woman had smiled and had said that her name was Kate Jones.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world to say that her own name was Mary Smith, and it very well might have been.

At the office next day there had been more flowers and congratulatory messages and calls and another festive lunch in her honor, and Kate returned home keyed up by all the excitement. She went up to her room to relax before dinner and had savored a second sherry when she realized that it was time for dinner. To look her best when she greeted the children and Miss Smith she put on fresh lipstick and combed her hair, then left her room and walked the length of the hall toward the playroom at the head of the stairs.

"Your mother doesn't love you," a gentle voice murmured. The words weren't accusing. Rather they were a simple statement of fact.

So Janney had complained to Miss Smith and was turning her against Kate. Damned little snitch. But Miss Smith's soft pronouncement was in error. Kate loved Janney. She just didn't find her amiable or pleasant, and it wasn't fair of Janney to make Miss Smith take sides. Kate would break up their gossipy little tête-à-tête. She contrived a loud theatrical cough and pounded her heels against the stairsteps as she went down to the dining room.

She was startled to see Janney at the table looking greedily at her empty plate. How did she get there so quickly? She must have raced through Nan's room and down the back stairs. Janney looked up, smiled placidly, and said, "Hello, mama."

The boys were at the table, too, and eager, as always, for food. They greeted Kate warmly and Elizabeth came out of the kitchen with a tureen of soup and set it on the sideboard, and Nan ladled the soup into bowls and served them. Under Miss Smith's supervision the children had become adept at housework, and they did it with a certain panache, as if it was satisfying to serve others.

Then Miss Smith came in, a little breathless, and begged their pardon for being late, and Kate was aware that Miss Smith and

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Janney seemed to take great pains not to look at each other, as if they might somehow betray the confidential talk they had just had in the playroom.

Well, let them have their little secrets and they could plot against Kate if they felt like it. Things had been going too well both at home and at the office, and it was time Kate came down to earth after the last few giddy days of celebrating her promotion. She began to think of the condominium in Morningside that she hoped to sell the next morning. The landscaped grounds and the height of the ceilings made up for the small kitchen and the lack of a foyer. She shouldn't have any difficulty whatever in closing the sale.

They all ate with good appetite and Miss Smith asked Nan for more soup, and Mark and Elizabeth wanted more, too. Kate glanced at Janney who smiled at her. The smile was much too shrewd and cunning to belong to a little girl.

Then Kate glanced at Miss Smith who was very much occupied with her soup.

Again Kate ordered herself to rise above any domestic unpleasantness and concentrate on business, and that was a good thing because she realized that tomorrow she should ask at least $3000 more for the condominium than she had planned. Even at that increased price it was a bargain because of the magnificent view of the river. What on earth had made her forget the river in appraising the value of the property?

When Kate's attention returned to dining she saw that Janney was smiling her wicked little smile at Miss Smith who closed her eyes and shook her head gently. Then Miss Smith wiped at her cheek almost as if a tear had fallen. But her manner was collected when she said, "I hope you had a good day at the office, Mrs. Jones. We're all so very proud of you."

Selling the condominium next day had been simple and Kate disposed efficiently of mounds of accumulated business. The promotion had given her added confidence while at the same time it had increased her humility. Hard work and application were all very well, but they were nothing without good luck, and her good luck included health and ambition, but mostly Miss Smith.

As was her custom on returning home from work, Kate headed directly for her room after patting Alexander, their boxer, on the head. He had responded with an affectionate licking of her hand and had slumped back into his interrupted snooze. Miss Smith

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and Janney were in the playroom and Kate said hello as she passed by. In her room she sat down, propped her feet on the ottoman, and began to read the afternoon paper. She had almost finished it when she heard the front door open and close. There was no sound of footsteps. Then the door opened and closed again.

The house had never been so silent.

Whoever had returned was much more subdued than usual—in fact, stealthy. Every entrance of every homecoming child always seemed accompanied by fanfares and exuberant talk and a frenzied reunion with Alexander.

Two persons had entered, and yet the house was absolutely still and Alexander slept undisturbed.

The silence was odd, even mystifying.

Five persons must be inside. Kate had called out a greeting to Miss Smith and Janney when she arrived and two other persons had entered. Kate folded the paper and the rustling of the pages reverberated, emphasizing the quiet all around. She went to the playroom and its door was half opened. When Kate peered around the door she was astonished to see that the dolls were in disarray. Janney was almost obsessive in setting each doll in its exact place when she finished playing with it.

Miss Smith must be in the kitchen preparing dinner. But Miss Smith wasn't there, nor was there any sign that a meal was in preparation. Nothing boiled on the stove. No vegetables had been put on the counter to be rinsed and peeled or chopped. The oven hadn't been turned on.

Miss Smith and Janney were somewhere. Kate called out to them and their names ran together. She shouted their names.

Two persons had entered the house a few minutes ago. She had heard the front door open and close twice. Each of the children had a key. She called the names of the other children and there was no answer, but she had alarmed Alexander and he was barking furiously. Her anxiety was catching.

She was an idiot. Why had she been convinced that two persons had entered? They could just as well have left. That was it. Janney and Miss Smith had left separately, and Kate was alone in the house and acting as if she were demented. Yet surely it was an odd time for them to leave—Miss Smith had dinner to cook and Janney had left her dolls in wild disorder, strewn about the shelves and floor.

Kate darted to the front door, opened it, and ran down the front

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steps. It was almost dark, the air was cold, and she shivered.

She forgot her discomfort when she saw Miss Smith and Janney running across the lawn, but which one was the pursuer and which the pursued she couldn't tell. They seemed to be arguing. They couldn't be arguing. Miss Smith had never argued with anyone.

Janney ran ahead and then stopped, as if she had taunted Miss Smith. Then Miss Smith was in the lead. She and Janney were in some sort of combat and they were evenly matched for Janney was a tall child, almost as tall as Miss Smith, and she was very strong.

Janney and Miss Smith were pulling desperately at each other, and then Miss Smith leaped from the brick embankment onto the sidewalk and dragged Janney with her. They were on the verge between the sidewalk and street, still tugging at each other, not aware of anything or anyone but their private battle.

Kate yelled at them, but the wind threw her voice behind her. They were in the street then and cars swerved and their drivers screamed at them, and then a car whose driver was intent only on speed and having the right of way blew his horn and shouted. Janney and Miss Smith defied his anger and refused to move, and then Kate saw that one of them was pushing the other out of the car's path. The car struck and a figure was flung in an awkward arabesque against the curb.

Traffic stopped and car doors opened, and someone said the injured person must not be moved. But others who were closer said it didn't matter at all whether the person was moved, and someone lifted the body and laid it on the verge. A crowd had grown spontaneously from the moment of the accident and a man standing in the spotlight of a street lamp kept saying that it wasn't his fault.

Kate pushed through the swarm of people. Duty compelled her to take charge, and yet she didn't want to look. She didn't want to know which of those two was dead, and she whispered no, no, when she saw the choice that fate had made.

Miss Smith resembled one of Janney's dolls that Kate had just seen sprawled across the playroom floor, and then Kate turned to see that Janney was holding a doll, the dear appealing one with freckles and pigeon toes. The doll's little straw hat was awry but it was still on her head held by an elastic that ran beneath her chin. Kate had loved the doll, just as Elizabeth and Nan had, but

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Janney had ostracized her, had set her alone in the coventry of the playroom's front window from where she had looked out onto the world as if she begged someone to come and rescue her.

People had begun to leave. Only a few stragglers lingered for the arrival of the police. Kate felt almost alone with Miss Smith, and in a manner in which she would have made a comment to one of the unknown bystanders she asked Janney, "What are you doing with that doll?"

Janney was standing with her back to Miss Smith. At Kate's question she moved farther away from the dead body and from Kate so that their distance from each other formed a triangle, and then she began to speak.

"Miss Smith was crazy about her. She didn't like the way I treated her, keeping her all by herself in the window. She said if I didn't want her she would like to have her in her room. Imagine anybody as old as Miss Smith wanting a doll. Today when I came home from school Miss Smith was in the playroom holding the doll, and I snatched it and said I was going to throw it in the lake and I meant it. A little while ago I sneaked out of the house with the doll to take it to the lake, but Miss Smith came right behind me and caught up and tried to take the doll away from me."

Kate looked at the sharp and pretty face of her youngest child and then down at Miss Smith. Kate thought of that long-ago fortunate day when Miss Smith had arrived. On the alert for anyone who might be answering the ad, Kate had dashed out to find Miss Smith looking upward, and she now realized that it was the doll that had attracted Miss Smith. Her presence had nothing to do with the ad for a housekeeper.

And last night—which seemed far, far in the past—Kate had thought Miss Smith meant Janney when she said your mother doesn't love you, when obviously she meant that Janney didn't love the doll.

Kate wondered what fascination the doll could have had for Miss Smith. Had she spent a childhood without a doll, or had the doll she loved the most been stolen or destroyed? Surely it must have been more compulsive than that. The doll must have reminded her of a real child who had died or been taken away from her. The lost doll or the lost child must be at the heart of Miss Smith's mystery—a loss that had robbed her of her identity and had set her down accidentally in a strange household where she had been a godsend. And for all the gifts of her presence and ded-

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ication she had been denied the gift she most wanted.

"Why didn't you give the doll to Miss Smith? In God's name, why didn't you give it to her?" Kate walked toward Janney to take the doll and Janney stepped back beyond her grasp.

"Jannette Jones, give me that doll."

For a while Janney was still defiant and then the sharpness left her face and she advanced toward her mother. She handed the doll to Kate, and when she saw what Kate was about to do she said, "No, mama, let me," and she knelt beside Miss Smith and laid the doll in her arms.

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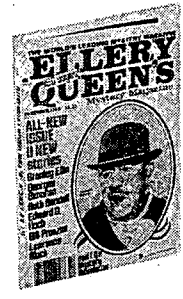

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

U.S. STEAL: Pick the dullest reading material in the world, and if you do not select United Kingdom tax-form instructions you will probably come up with the fine print of American insurance policies.

Believe it or not, Peter Spielmann and Aaron Zelman found a way of making the insurance business both interesting and, wonder of wonders, comprehensible in *The Life Insurance Conspiracy Made Elementary by Sherlock Holmes* (Fireside Paperback/ Simon & Schuster, $4.95). It is a muckraking book for consumers, telling of the worst offenses committed by life-insurance companies against an ignorant public. It even makes a small attempt to show who the good guys are. The first fourth of the book is a Holmes/Watson pastiche in which insurance and its intricacies, which is to say its efforts at chicanery, are described in an entertaining dialogue titled "The Adventure of the Indiscreet Agent." This is neither the first nor the last insurance handbook produced for the layman, but it is indubitably the most unusual and fascinating.

LITTLE—VERY LITTLE—LIST: Every now and then, one begins to wonder at how lazy readers can be, and at how entirely they can be gulled. Joseph Cataio has recently compiled a *Mystery Checklist* (Reference Books Inc., P.O. Box 7866, Chicago, IL 60680, $2.00), which is nothing more than a list of books by twenty mystery writers. The idea is that you can use it to check off those books which you have already read, and identify those still undiscovered. So many other books have these lists, plus so much more, that it seems entirely redundant. Someone purporting to be expert enough to produce such a compilation ought to know how to spell Ross Macdonald's name, which is inaccurate—not once, as with a typographical error, but everywhere, suggesting an ignorance of the correct spelling. It is, furthermore, distressing to see a list of "novels" containing unidentified short-story collections, and

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a disgrace to see a Raymond Chandler checklist with such titles as *Pearls Are a Nuisance, Pick-up on Noon Street*, and *Smart-aleck Kill,* none of which contains first-appearance stories and all of which duplicate material previously published in other listed books. This seems to defeat the purpose of the booklet. One of the few $2.00 items that can be termed a ripoff.

MISCELLANEA: Margaret Millar has completed a new novel and her husband, Ross Macdonald, describes it as "very funny." *Letters* by Raymond Chandler and James M. Fox has just been published by Maurice F. Neville, 835 Laguna Street, Santa Barbara, CA 93101. The correspondence between the two mystery writers is available only in a limited hardcover edition of 350 numbered copies signed by Fox, priced at $35.00. Harlan Ellison's new novel, *Shrikes,* is destined to be one of the big books of 1980. Physical problems have been overcome by Phyllis A. Whitney and Walter B. Gibson and they are both back at the typewriter.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

Stephen Sondheim's operatic *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* sings for a very gruesome supper. Based on the legendary Nineteenth Century British bogeyman (the English Karloff, Tod Slaughter, played him in the movies) whose barber-chair victims turned up in meat pies, he goes back to a London style of melodrama theater, Sondheim tells us, "whose admirable objective was to stun its audience with a holocaust of thrills, horrors, and shocks."

The composer-lyricist has mounted this durable penny-dreadful on Broadway as a sort of somber opera, with mainly sung dialogue and no concession to pop tunes, against a nightmare setting of London shops and alleys, madhouses and wharves. "Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd, his skin was pale and his eye was odd"—Sondheim gives us a full Gothic tale of a runaway, unjustly imprisoned convict driven by vengeance. In the role, Len Cariou is excellent, as is Angela Lansbury, the pie-shop proprietress and partner to his fast-food empire. The lines ("Gentlemen, I am at your disposal"), the lyrics ("See his razor gleam . . . as it floats across the throats of hypocrites") are devilishly sharp.

As well they might be. Sondheim's love for the mystery was demonstrated in his twisty screenplay, *The Last of Sheila.* The book is by Hugh Wheeler, who, with

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Richard Wilson Webb, for two decades wrote as Patrick Quentin (*Puzzle for Fools* and much else). Their Sweeney is an uncompromising Nineteenth Century tapestry of terror, which will jolt and dismay many. Although Todd is the most operatic barber since Figaro, his nicks are mean.

Ears are picking up: Mystery radio is on a definite comeback beam. Joining the five-year-old CBS Radio Mystery Theater is another national anthology series, Sears Radio Theater (also CBS), which devotes each of five hours a week to a different genre and host—Wednesdays it's mystery with Vincent Price. (Lorne Greene's western segments on Mondays plus Richard Widmark's adventures on Fridays also often offer stories in our genre.) The quality is high, for the shows are produced by the legendary Elliott Lewis (who helmed *Suspense Crime Classics* and other great shows) and Fletcher Markle. Nelson Riddle scores original music for each program.

Lewis has told EQMN that Norman Corwin and Arch Oboler will write and direct some of the dramas but most of the scripts are by younger writers not old enough to have been contributors to radio's Golden Age. Lewis tells us that Wednesdays will be dedicated to tales of "mystery and suspense with a sense of foreboding, detective stories, whodunits or whydunits . . . ladies in distress or men at the very end of their tether trying to escape the horror that pursues them." Once a week, at least, again on radio.

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INTERVIEW: JON L. BREEN

In addition to being a reviewer of crime books for *EQMM* and the *Wilson Library Bulletin,* Jon L. Breen is noted for his parodies and pastiches of other mystery writers and his series of baseball mysteries featuring Ed Gorgon. He has written about 20 parodies involving the greatest of the Great Detectives, but he has returned most often to Ellery Queen and Philo Vance, with three parody-mysteries each.

EQMM: Why do you write pastiches more often than other types of short stories?

BREEN: Actually, most of them are parodies, which tend to exaggerate those elements which are recognizable, while a pastiche attempts to simulate the original author's style as accurately as possible. My first published story was a parody of Ed McBain's 87th Precinct stories, so I naturally tried other fiction in the same vein.

Strangely enough, unlike in my other stories, I begin a parody with no plot idea—nothing more than an idea of how to imitate an author's style.

EQMM: Do you tend to parody authors you like?

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BREEN: Yes, 90 percent of the time. I hope it's evident. The only time I wrote one about an author I didn't like (so I guess it's more than 90 percent of the time), the story was a terrible failure. Everyone disliked it, and it was never published. I try to have fun with a particular style.

EQMM: What do you look for when you begin a satire?

BREEN: There are, of course, many authors who don't have a distinctive style (just as there are actors who don't), and that includes many of the best writers in the genre. The major qualification a writer needs to be satirized is that he have stylistic components recognizable to a wide range of readers. The easiest writer to parody was S. S. Van Dine, although I would have to call these pastiches. The most difficult was Earl Derr Biggers.

EQMM: Do you read parodies by other authors?

BREEN: I would never leave a mystery parodist unread; I love all parodies.

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

In the history of mystery and detective fiction, collections of parodies and pastiches have been rare indeed, and most of them have been devoted to imitations of one author, Arthur Conan Doyle, and one detective, Sherlock Holmes. Some of these have been the work of several hands (e.g., the scarce 1944 collection *The Misadventures of Sherlock Holmes,* edited by Ellery Queen), others by a single author (e.g., August Derleth's Solar Pons collections and Robert L. Fish's volumes about Schlock Homes).

The only collection I know of devoted to stories imitating several different detectives and their creators is Thomas Narcejac's *Usurpation d'Identité* (1959). Sadly for monolingual readers of English, the Narcejac volume appeared only in French, though several of the stories appeared in translation in *EQMM* in the early sixties.

The closest English-language equivalents are the Detection Club's *Ask a Policeman* (1933), Marion Mainwaring's *Murder in Pastiche* (1954), Leo Bruce's *Case for Three Detectives* (1936), and Agatha Christie's *Partners in Crime* (1929). However, in the first three, the famous sleuths involved are not given individual cases to solve but apply their skills (which in each case prove questionable) to one overall mystery, and in the Christie volume the detectives are always Tuppence and Tommy, though they apply the styles of various fictional detectives.

Thus, this month's lead item has, I think, a unique distinction (and I eagerly invite correction if

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I am wrong): the first multi-target collection of individual mystery parody-pastiches to be published in English.

*** Norma Schier: *The Anagram Detectives,* with an Introduction by Stanley Ellin, Mysterious Press, 129 W. 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10019, $10.00. Ten of these fourteen tales first appeared in *EQMM,* but never under the Schier byline. Rather they were signed by such anagrammed author names as Norma Haigs, Handon C. Jorricks, Leyne Requel, and O. X. Rusett. All the other place and character names in the stories (including such great detectives as Hoskell Chomers, Pierre Choulot, Martin Copable, and Mooch Sheckls) are also anagrams.

The anagrams alone are a feast for puzzle fans, but wordplay aside, the tales are funny and well crafted, accurate imitations in both plot and style. My favorite is the academic mystery, "Lament for a Scholar," signed by Neil MacNiesh and starring the supremely witty and literate Scotland Yard official Sir Blane Jopphy.

*** Janwillem van de Wetering: *The Maine Massacre,* Houghton Mifflin, $8.95. Sgt. de Gier of the Amsterdam police and his ailing chief, the commissaris, visit the United States in their latest case. It's the author's usual mixture of police work and philosophy, but the claustrophobic atmosphere of a small-town Maine winter creates more real tension than in other van de Weterings I've read.

*** James Herbert: *Fluke,* Signet, $1.95. Here is a dog story with a difference: a man imprisoned in a dog's body, guided by both human and canine instincts, tries both to survive and to solve the mystery of his present condition. Sometimes funny, sometimes tragic, always credible once the initial premise is accepted, this may be the best and most original to date from the inventive Herbert.

*** Muriel Davidson: *The Thursday Woman,* Atheneum, $9.95. In this compelling, harrowing novel of troubled minds, a seemingly happy wife and mother becomes fascinated by an Adonis on trial for wife murder and seems determined to destroy her own life in irrational attempts to save him. It's a fascinating, frightening exploration of psycho-sexual phenomena.

*** Velda Johnston: *The Silver Dolphin,* Dodd Mead, $8.95. Johnston's latest is written and plotted with her customary skill. The period (1850s) and settings (Sag Harbor, Long Island, and a whaling ship at sea) are well realized and for a time who's-the-hero is nearly as big a question as who's-the-villain.

*** Estelle Thompson: *Hunter in the Dark,* Walker, $7.95. A blind Australian schoolteacher turns detective in the Duncan Maclain-Max Carrados tradition to find the killer of two young girls and to save a third. This novel doesn't avoid all the suspense novel clichés, but it's well paced and involving throughout and leaves the reader feeling good about hu-

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manity.

** Patrick Cake: *The Pro-Am Murders,* Proteus Press, 250 Thunderbird Drive, Aptos, CA 95003, $8.95. Sadomasochistic author-spy Dion Quince battles a faceless mass murderer called Omnipotent against a well realized background of the Bing Crosby Golf Tournament. Author Cake doesn't go for the safe shots in this flamboyant thriller; he *attacks* the course (and can be forgiven if he occasionally overshoots the green).

** Peter Tanous: *The Earhart Mission,* Simon and Schuster, $8.95. The 1937 disappearance of Amelia Earhart forms the background for this contemporary thriller of investigative reporting, stockmarket finagling, and marine salvage. The novel is short on style and characterization, but Tanous' plot and the inherent interest of a famous unsolved mystery will keep most reading to the end.

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AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	RETAIL PRICE	DISCOUNT PRICE
Alexander, Karl	TIME AFTER TIME	Delacorte	$9.95	$7.95
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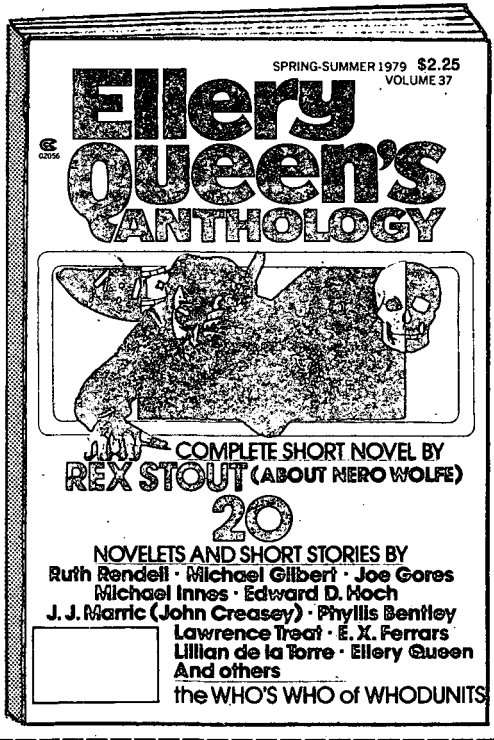
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Pierre Chambrun—a legend in his own time—is the manager of the Hotel Beaumont, the top luxury hotel in New York and one of the great hotels of the world. Now, Chambrun has faced nearly every kind of crisis in his private and public domain, and those who know him would say that no set or chain of circumstances, however serious or bizarre, would break Chambrun's calm. He is "the cool man," confronting with equanimity any situation that might occur—including murder . . .

CHAMBRUN AND THE OBVIOUS CLUE

by *HUGH PENTECOST*

"I got a right to sing the blues,
I got a right to feel lowdown—"

I don't know if those are the true words of the song. They are the ones Freddie Lukes sang each night in his whiskey-tainted voice as a prelude to Marilyn Stark's entrance. Then came his special magic on the keyboard as he played the rest of it, without any vocal. Freddie manages a distillation of the joys and the sentiments of Fats Waller and Duke Ellington. Liquor may be the reason he never made it as big as those jazz giants, because there are moments when he could sweep you away with the sheer brilliance of his improvisations.

"I got a right to sing the blues," was the nightly notification to the audience in The Blue Lagoon that Marilyn was about to make her appearance. The spotlight on the black man at the piano would shift to the entrance, center stage, and Marilyn, with her golden hair, her elegant figure, her expressive face, would pick up the lyric and come downstage to a thunder of applause.

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For the next hour she held the people spellbound. Twice a night she did her thing, at 8:30 for the people who were not going to the theater, and at 12:30 for those who had been and were looking for more. And there were those who stayed for both shows, determined to see and hear all there was to see and hear that night.

I am the public-relations man at the Hotel Beaumont, New York's top luxury hotel which houses The Blue Lagoon nightclub. For a month now I had managed to make my rounds so that I could catch each of Marilyn Stark's nightly performances. I would appear behind the red-velvet rope at the entrance and Mr. Cardoza, the maitre d', would greet me.

"Good evening, Mr. Haskell," he would say.

"Good evening, Mr. Cardoza," I would say.

I've had reason every night of my life for the last ten years to contact this elegant gentleman who looks like a Spanish nobleman. He has never called me by my first name, Mark, and I have never called him Luis. He has a gift for making the formality seem closer than the casual use of first names.

On this particular morning—12:30 A.M.—I arrived just as Freddie Lukes was beginning *"I got a right to sing the blues,"* and Cardoza gave me his enigmatic smile.

"Prompt as usual, I see," he said.

The stage darkened. The spotlight moved slowly away from Freddie Lukes and his flying fingers to the center entrance. You could hear a little whisper of expectancy run through the rich-looking audience. But Marilyn didn't appear.

The Hotel Beaumont is run with a kind of Swiss-watch precision. No fixed routines ever vary by a hair, not even the entrance on cue of its star *chanteuse* in its elegant nightclub. I remember Cardoza and I glanced at each other. Marilyn was three bars of music late—unheard of. Freddie Lukes at the piano began to repeat the theme music, this time a louder, stomped-out version as if he thought that for some reason Marilyn hadn't heard her cue. It could be a number of things, of course: a heel caught in the hem of her skirt at the last moment with Lucy, her dresser, making frantic repairs, or a coughing fit because of something swallowed the wrong way.

I remember wondering if Pierre Chambrun, the Beaumont's legendary manager, was aware, wherever he might be in the hotel at the moment, of this momentary break in an established routine. We who work with Chambrun are convinced he has some kind of built-in personal radar system that warns him of any deviation in pro-

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cedure, from the penthouse rooftop to the subbasement. The truth is, of course, that the moment anything goes even slightly wrong there is someone to notify him. I was actually turning toward Cardoza's reservation phone when the spotlight at Marilyn's entrance point went out, and the dimmed houselights came up. There was to be no show, at least not for the moment.

Cardoza hurried between tables toward the stage. Freddie Lukes ended his theme music on a jangling chord and took off for the backstage area. Then someone backstage let out a blood-curdling scream. It was the announcement of a violence that none of us is ever likely to forget.

Somewhere else I have written that every six months of my life I fall in love forever. I am, I guess, what you might call a one-woman-at-a-time man. I remember almost all my gals with affection, one or two with both affection and regret, one with love and enormous gratitude. That one is Marilyn Stark.

It happened eight years ago. I was young, full of enthusiasm for my job at the Beaumont, encountering famous people every day of my life, imagining that I was an incomparably sophisticated man of the world. I told myself that no woman who had an affair with Mark Haskell would ever forget him. I was, I thought, really something. Women were easy to come by in that glamorous setting, so easy that I was actually a little shocked by that fact from time to time. I put it down to my own irresistible charm.

Then there was Marilyn. Today, onstage, she looks in her late twenties. She is actually in her late forties. She came to fill a six-week engagement at The Blue Lagoon, and I was hopelessly lost to her in the first week. She was the first "older woman" in my life. She taught me tenderness, and how to laugh, and the skills of love-making. I promised her everything, she promised me nothing but the moment at hand. It was six weeks never matched in my life, before or since. It was she who said goodbye, not me. For me it was forever. She was moving on to an engagement in Las Vegas.

"You've made me feel very young again, Mark," she said that last time. "I love you for it."

A year later she came back for another run at The Blue Lagoon. I rushed in to pick up the old relationship. It wasn't to be.

"Let's leave it as it is, Mark," she said. "I'd rather remember what we had—just as it was."

There had, of course, been other women in my life during that

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year, and there were new men in hers. She was right, I guess, though at the time I didn't think so. It could never be quite the same again.

And so, each year when she came back to play The Blue Lagoon, I would send flowers to her dressing room, and a bottle of champagne, and we would chat, like old friends, about nothing in particular. Never about love, or what had been.

I didn't go to watch each of her shows because I was grieving for her, or lost without her. She had known, among other things, how to write "The End" to our story without drawing blood. I went to watch and listen because this woman belonged among the greats of all time. I am too young to have ever heard Nora Bayes or Helen Morgan or Ruth Etting, but I have heard Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan and Lena Horne. Marilyn belonged in their class. Those gals begin where the average singer leaves off.

So that night, like every night, I was there to hear the best there is. I was aware of at least three men in the audience, one of whom might be the man in her life at the moment. They were Richard Loring, a handsome young man-about-town, a wealthy sportsman, bubbling with animal energy; George Canaday, multimillionaire industrialist, much older but able to buy Marilyn half of the world if she asked for it; and Peter Sebastian, the bearded artist, sought after, admired, obviously mad about Marilyn.

These three came to hear her almost every night, and they were there the night that ghastly screaming started backstage. They, and a couple of hundred other people who adored Marilyn as a performer, were never to hear her sing again.

Death, I imagine, never comes as less than a shock, except perhaps in very old people—I mean, to the one who is still living. Sudden death, without the preface of illness, death as the result of an accident or an act of God, is always shocking. But death that comes as a result of purposeful violence by another human being goes beyond shock.

Marilyn—lovely, vivacious, tender, joyful Marilyn—lay on the floor of her room, dressed in an evening gown in which she would never perform again. Her head had been beaten unmercifully, and her golden hair was matted with dark blood. She had also been struck time after time across the face, and her beauty had been completely obliterated. For one wild moment I told myself it couldn't be Marilyn. It had to be someone else wearing Marilyn's gown. And

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then I turned away, fighting a terrible nausea.

For a moment the faces that circled Marilyn were all familiar. There were Cardoza, his elegant composure shattered; Freddie Lukes, who had come running off the stage, his black face streaming sweat; Danny Haines, the stage manager who handled the backstage at The Blue Lagoon. And there was Lucy Morris, who had screamed us all to attention. Lucy is perhaps 60 years old, ugly, gnarled by arthritis, Marilyn's dresser for the past 20 years. Lucy would have put her arm in an electric meat grinder for Marilyn if Marilyn had asked it.

Lucy's mouth was open for another scream when she saw me, someone Marilyn had cared for, a friend, and she catapulted herself into my arms, shaking and sobbing.

Then others were crowding into the room and at the door, including the three men who dreamed of Marilyn—the sportsman, the tycoon, the artist. It was George Canaday, the tycoon, looking old and gray, who said, "Someone call the police!"

I thought that must be in character. Get someone else to do what must be done.

Something better than the police arrived at that moment, a dark, wiry, intense little man named Jerry Dodd who is the Beaumont's Security Chief.

"Out!" he shouted at Canaday, Loring, Sebastian, and the others crowded around them. "Out!" He slammed the dressing-room door in their faces and fastened the inside bolt.

Jerry Dodd knelt and took a close look at Marilyn. I heard him swear under his breath. "Anyone thought to call Doc Partridge?" he asked. "Not that there's anything he can do for her." Doc Partridge is the house physician. Then Jerry looked at me. "You notified Chambrun?"

"For God's sake, Jerry, I just got here!"

It was Cardoza who went to the dressing-room phone and tried to locate The Man. Old Lucy Morris and I clung to each other, as though to lose one another was to be lost forever.

People have seen Pierre Chambrun in many kinds of crises over the years at the Beaumont. They would say, I think, that no circumstance, however serious or bizarre, ever changes his outward aspect. He is always well-tailored, wearing exactly the right clothes for the moment. Like a good actor, he seems never to be caught in an awkward gesture or movement. Short, he walks with such a firm

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stride that he seems taller than he is. A Hollywood producer was once interested in doing a movie about the Beaumont with Chambrun as the central figure. He asked me which actor I would choose to play the role. Unfortunately, the perfect actor is no longer available—the late Claude Rains.

Those of us who knew Chambrun well could always find a clue to his feelings in his heavy-lidded eyes. Those eyes could be as compassionate as the Good Samaritan's, as curious as a mischievous child's, or as angry as a hanging judge's. When he walked into Marilyn's dressing room that night, the hanging judge was in command. You couldn't look at her without feeling an intense and fierce rage at the person who had done this. I remember feeling reassured as he stood there, looking down at what was left of Marilyn. He would nail the person responsible for this if anyone could.

I look at what I have written and I have to say that a dinner jacket, with a lace-frilled dress shirt, a wine-red tie and cummerbund with a matching flower in his lapel, were not exactly the right clothes for a murder. He was dressed for all the various events taking place that evening in the hotel, the events he would cover on his nightly rounds. He was always just a little more elegant than his most elegant customer or guest.

He looked at Jerry Dodd, his eyes cold enough to freeze one's blood. "Weapon?" he asked.

"Not so far," Jerry said. "Looks like it was carried away."

Those frightening eyes circled the ring of faces. "Well?" he said.

It was Lucy Morris, still clinging to me, who broke the silence. "I—I found her," Lucy said. "She—she had sent me to the drug store for—for something, and when I came back I found her—like that!" Her body was still shaking.

"What were you sent to get and when did you go to get it?" Chambrun asked in a voice that was cold and flat.

"Poor Marilyn!" Lucy said. "She suffered from migraine headaches. She felt an attack coming on and discovered she was out of the medicine she takes for it. It's a prescription, and she sent me to the drug store in the lobby to get it refilled."

"What time was that?" Chambrun asked.

"It was exactly twelve fifteen," Lucy said.

"Exactly?"

"I know because Danny gave her the fifteen-minute call just as I was going out the door." She looked at Danny Haines, the stage manager, for confirmation.

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"I don't know where Lucy was at twelve fifteen," Danny said. "But Marilyn was here. There's an intercom system between my control booth, where I handle the lights and other cues, and this room. For the second show, at twelve o'clock, Freddie takes the stage with his piano and I give Marilyn the half-hour call. 'Half hour, Marilyn,' I say. And she always says, 'Thank you, Danny.' At twelve fifteen I call again and tell her fifteen minutes. And she answers."

"And she answered tonight, at twelve fifteen?"

"Yes. Perfectly normal, perfectly ordinary. Lucy could have been at the door, like she says, but I wouldn't know, of course. All I know is that Marilyn was alive and in no trouble then. But ten minutes later—"

"What happened ten minutes later?"

"I give her a five-minute call," Danny said. "Sometimes she answers, sometimes she doesn't. Tonight she didn't. But, like I say, that wasn't unusual. She often goes out into the wings and waits for the music cue from Freddie."

Chambrun looked down at the tragedy on the floor. "But she wasn't in the wings tonight," he said. He turned to Lucy. "You left for the drug store at twelve fifteen, you say. It takes two or three minutes to walk down the back corridor and into the lobby. The pharmacist had to fill your prescription."

"It's just tablets, Mr. Chambrun," Lucy said. "He had to type a label, that was all."

"And you came back here with the pills," Chambrun said. "In time to hear Danny give that five-minute call?"

"Oh, my God, I don't know, Mr. Chambrun!" Lucy moaned. "I saw her. I don't know what I heard or didn't hear. It—it could have been after the five-minute call, because I knew she only had a minute or two to take a pill, get into her costume, and get on stage."

"She's in her costume!" Chambrun said.

Lucy twisted her head from side to side. "I know. That's another odd thing," she said.

"Odd?"

"She never dresses without me," Lucy said.

"But the time was short, if she was to make her cue."

Lucy pointed to something I hadn't noticed before. It was a metal frame, standing on four legs, made of tubing. "I hang the gown on that frame," Lucy said, "and raise the frame. She stands under it and I lower the dress over her head. It's for quick changes, and to

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keep from messing up her hairdo. When I left for the medicine, the gown was on that dressing frame."

"Because you weren't there she did it herself," Chambrun said.

"No," Lucy said.

"She must have."

"She never did before. No, she wouldn't have. It only takes ten seconds for her to stand under the dress. I lower it and zip her up from behind. She'd have waited for me."

"But she didn't," Chambrun said.

Lucy looked puzzled.

"How was she dressed before you left for the drug store?"

"Pantyhose, evening slippers, brassiere," Lucy said. "She'd done her makeup and her hair before I went to the drug store."

"So someone knocked on her door and she got into her gown," Chambrun said.

"Not anyone who had any business being here," Lucy said. "Not me or Freddie or Danny. We'd all seen her hundreds of times almost naked that way. It's show business. If—if it was one of the gentlemen she might have slipped into a dressing gown." She pointed to a kind of negligee hanging over a chair next to the dressing table and its mirror.

"What gentlemen?" Chambrun asked.

"There are three men who have been in constant attendance," Cardoza said. "They're outside in the hall now."

"But she wouldn't have got into the gown for them," Lucy said stubbornly. "She'd have waited for me. The dressing gown, maybe, but not the costume."

"Somebody came here and killed her," Chambrun said. "No one saw anyone who didn't belong here?"

"I was at the drug store," Lucy said.

"I was on stage, at the piano," Freddie Lukes said.

"I was in my booth," Danny Haines said. "I can only see the stage and the audience from there. It's a one-woman show, Mr. Chambrun. There are no stagehands, no other regular people backstage."

"So there was no problem for the killer to come and go, unseen," Chambrun said.

"Carrying a weapon," Jerry Dodd said. "Why didn't she scream for help?"

"This room is soundproofed," Chambrun reminded him. "It was done so singers could vocalize without being heard. She could have screamed her head off and only the killer would have heard it. . . ."

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The Beaumont is like a small city, with its own security force, its own shops, restaurants, bars, its own hospital, even its own bank. The nightlife time when Marilyn had been killed was one of the busiest in the hotel's schedule, which is why the drug store stayed open so late.

Like any small city, the Beaumont has suffered its share of crimes, including murders. Lieutenant Walter Hardy of Homicide was not a stranger to us. We were grateful to have the Marilyn Stark case assigned to him and not to some detective unknown to us. Chambrun and Hardy have worked together before and they have a mutual respect for each other, even though their approaches to a problem are totally different.

Hardy, a big slow-moving blond, travels the painstaking, detailed route, covering every possible angle, collecting every scrap of evidence, sifting every point for and against every possible theory. He must build an unshakable case for the District Attorney, must have every doubt answered in advance before he makes an arrest.

On the other hand, Chambrun is intuitive, a hunch player; he has done his rejecting and accepting almost before Hardy has picked up the first stone to look under it. Chambrun's approach might seem almost frivolous to a stranger—he looks like a man in a hurry to get his hotel running normally again. Those of us who know him well are aware of how invariably right his intuition and his hunches are. Hardy had learned over the years to listen and to follow the leads Chambrun gives him.

The inquiry had shifted to Chambrun's office on the second floor while the crew from the medical examiner's office, the fingerprint men, and the police photographers had taken over the grim scene in Marilyn's dressing room. The office is more like a handsomely decorated living room than an office: the luxurious drapes at the windows, the magnificent Oriental rug, the carved Florentine desk, the blue-period Picasso, a gift from the artist himself, that looks down at you from the wall facing the desk.

I was there with Cardoza and Jerry Dodd as Chambrun laid out his preliminary findings to Hardy.

"The timing is the most unusual factor in the case," Chambrun said. He was smoking one of his flat Egyptian cigarettes and sipping at a demitasse of Turkish coffee which was always kept brewed in a samovar on the sideboard. "We are dealing with something like twelve minutes. She was alive and untroubled at midnight and at twelve fifteen, when Danny Haines gave her the first two warning

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calls. Lucy Morris was with her when she got both those calls. Everything normal, Lucy comes back in about twelve minutes and finds Marilyn dead. That's the crucial period—those twelve minutes."

"Probably even less," Hardy said. "The killer had to wait for her to be alone—and had to be gone before Lucy came back from the drug store. Ten minutes at most, I'd say."

Chambrun nodded. "Okay—ten minutes in which the following takes place. The killer arrives—knowing the schedule backstage, by the way, knowing that when Freddie Lukes started his warmup that the backstage area would be clear."

"How could he know Lucy Morris would be sent to the drug store?" Hardy asked.

"Perhaps Lucy just got lucky," Chambrun said. "Perhaps the killer had counted on having to deal with Lucy, too. So—the killer arrives, carrying with him a weapon of some sort—an iron wrecking bar, a fireplace poker, something of that sort. Marilyn wasn't killed with a toothpick! An awkward weapon to carry in—and out. It's summer. Overcoats are not in order."

"A raincoat," Hardy suggested.

"Possible," Chambrun said. "Absolutely no threat of rain, but possible. So he comes in, carrying his weapon, slips backstage, and knocks on Marilyn's dressing-room door. Eight minutes left? And what does Marilyn do?"

"Lets him in," Hardy said.

"No, no, no," Chambrun said. "She asks him to wait a moment. She knows him, of course. She goes and stands under that dressing frame, lowers the dress over her head—an awkward procedure, according to Lucy. She zips up her gown. The zipper is at her back—another awkward procedure. She manages, however, taking at the shortest a minute. She goes to the door, fully dressed in her handsome gown, and lets the caller in."

"Seven minutes left," Hardy said, making a note in his little book.

"At most," Chambrun said. His face had become a cold hard mask. "The killer had come prepared to kill, not to converse. Right? This was a crime motivated by an almost unbelievable rage, certainly. No talk. The door is closed, all sound from the rest of the world shut out. The onslaught begins before Marilyn can speak a word. A dozen blows with that wrecking bar or poker—to the head, across the face. Nothing in the room is touched, which is why you won't find any fingerprints."

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"The doorknob?" Hardy asked.

"Perhaps gloves, perhaps his hand protected by the raincoat or his suit jacket when he had to let himself out," Chambrun said. "The whole horror could have taken as little as a couple of minutes. He came to kill—Marilyn is dead—he still has two or three minutes left in which to walk away before Lucy came back with the medicine from the drug store."

"Rage I buy," Hardy said. "But what could drive a man to such uncontrolled fury?"

Chambrun shrugged. "A rejected lover," he said.

"So we have three gents outside who might fit that bill," Hardy said. "It's time we talked to them, isn't it?"

Cardoza broke in. "If you're talking about Richard Loring the sportsman, George Canaday the tycoon, and Peter Sebastian the artist, I would have to swear under oath that not one of them could have been backstage after midnight when Freddie Lukes started his warmup. Each one of them was at his table in The Blue Lagoon the whole time."

"You're sure of that?" Hardy asked.

"Positive. It's the kind of thing I notice, it's part of my job," Cardoza said.

"Well, one of them or all of them may know something about other lovers, other rejected suitors," Hardy said. "Let's have the first one in."

The first one was handsome Richard Loring, the playboy sportsman. I had a feeling his shock and grief were genuine. He listened to the rejected-lover theory, frowning.

"Were you Marilyn's lover, Mr. Loring?" Hardy asked. The subtle approach was not in his arsenal.

"I'm not a kiss-and-tell boy, Lieutenant," he said. "Let us say that at one time Marilyn and I were close—but that was some time ago."

"And yet you came nearly every night to hear her sing?"

"I was fond of her and she was a great artist," Loring said.

"You weren't prepared to prevent anyone else from having her?"

"You have to be joking, Lieutenant," Loring said.

Chambrun lifted his heavy eyelids. "Are you married, Mr. Loring?"

"Lord, no," Loring said. "There are too many lovely women in the world to anchor oneself to one."

"How about Sebastian and Canaday? Are they married?"

"Sebastian, no," Loring said. "And a thirty-year marriage has just

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ended in divorce for the Canadays. I think George dreamed that he could buy Marilyn for himself. But George didn't kill her—if she'd turned him down. I was sitting at the next table to him the entire critical time. I can alibi him, he can alibi me—and Sebastian, too, for that matter. I wish I could help. I would do anything in my power to catch the maniac who did this dreadful thing."

"Thank you, Mr. Loring," Chambrun said.

When Loring had gone, Hardy said, "Let's have the next one."

"Let's wait a moment, Walter," Chambrun said. His eyes were narrowed, almost closed. "I think I have been an idiot."

We all waited for him to go on.

"There is a famous play of Frederick Lonsdale's," he said, "in which a sophisticated man-about-town says something like: 'I've been dealing with women all my life and do you know what I've found out about them? Nothing!' From the very beginning I've been refusing to look at the obvious clue in this case."

"Nothing's obvious to me," Hardy muttered.

"Why did Marilyn go through the awkward business of getting into her costume gown before admitting her visitor—the killer? Professional glamor was her business, but sexual glamor was, I daresay, her life. Think for a minute, gentlemen. A lover or an ex-lover calls. She has on only pantyhose and a bra. If it were someone she had been intimate with, she could receive him that way—not unheard of in the theater. She could slip on her dressing gown and a man would find that intriguing. But for her actual performance she would have waited for Lucy to dress her.

"But, gentlemen—and I don't pretend to know more than Lonsdale's character about women—I suggest that if a *woman* was calling on her, a woman who was her enemy, Marilyn would have chosen to receive her only with all the exterior glamor she could provide—in full stage costume. Semi-nudity or the dressing gown covering it would not have impressed another woman. In full costume Marilyn would have been showing a jealous woman how unbeatable, how truly glamorous she was."

"Are you saying it was a woman who could have delivered that beating?" Hardy said.

"A desperate, enraged woman, yes. A woman who came prepared to do it, yes. A woman from whom Marilyn expected nothing but tears, or pleadings—yes." Chambrun punched out his cigarette in the ashtray on his desk. "From the beginning I have overlooked the obvious. It had to be a woman. It explains why Marilyn chose to

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appear at her very best for her caller. Her best for a man and her best for a woman were two different things. If I were you, Walter, I would take off for the Canaday house on Fifth Avenue and ask Mrs. Canaday to provide you with an alibi for the critical time. And I would look around in the Canaday house for a weapon that might still reveal traces of blood at the police laboratory. Smashing a thirty-year marriage could drive a woman into a homicidal frenzy."

Those of you who followed the Marilyn Stark case in the media will know that Clarissa Canaday confessed to killing her husband's mistress backstage at The Blue Lagoon. It appeared that Marilyn, approaching 50, had decided that Canaday's great wealth could give her the security she suddenly felt she needed. Perhaps I am running Canaday down. Perhaps he had charms I couldn't recognize. At the trial he tried to aid his wife by claiming his cruel affair with Marilyn had driven her to insanity. The jury agreed and Clarissa Canaday is living out her life in a mental hospital.

And Chambrun? Well, as he has said so often, there was a hotel to run and we got back to it.

"Q"

NEXT MONTH . . .

11 *NEW* stories—including

JULIAN SYMONS (about flowers in the spring)

EDWARD D. HOCH (about Captain Leopold)

JACK RITCHIE (about Henry Turnbuckle)

BRIAN GARFIELD (about Charlie Dark)

RUTH RENDELL (about Inspector Wexford)

ROBERT L. FISH (about the art of deduction)

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 518th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . the tale of an unusual, perhaps a unique, chest containing 365 tiny drawers, one for each day of the year . . .

The author, Marilyn Pribus, is married to her high-school sweetheart, and they have two teenage sons. Mrs. Pribus teaches folk guitar and works as a volunteer at a Springfield, Virginia, crisis intervention Hotline.

We can't help wondering about the origin of Mrs. Pribus' first story: does she own a chest like the one she describes, or has she seen such a cabinet somewhere, or is the chest purely a figment of her fancy? . . .

THE CALENDAR CHEST

by MARILYN PRIBUS

On the day before her seventy-fourth birthday Pauline received the chest. The moving men uncrated it in the foyer below and struggled up the wide curving stairway. As they brought it through the bedroom door, scratching the jamb, Pauline noted sourly, she felt a sudden shiver of recognition. "Against that wall, I think," she directed, then dismissed them with a preoccupied wave of her hand as she surveyed the chest, at once familiar and mysterious.

As a child Pauline had often visited her Great Aunt Belinda. Even as a young woman Belinda had been ephemeral and fey. At family reunions the children whispered stories about Belinda having been kidnaped by gypsies at the age of three, about a lover who took his own life, about wild birds from the woods landing at her feet for crumbs of her breakfast toast.

Pauline remembered the last morning they'd been together. "Pauline," Belinda had said in her strange way of speaking, "some day you will have my chest of many drawers. The other children sometimes ventured to open the drawers, but you had respect for the

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things of others and respect for things we cannot understand. The chest shall be yours."

It must be 30 years since I've seen the chest, Pauline mused as she studied it. It was about one foot deep, four feet wide, and five feet high. The top was shaped like an old European city house in three decorative fan shapes, the middle one being the tallest. The entire chest was stained a dark color and a gold stencil design was faintly visible through the cracked varnish.

There were 24 horizontal rows of tiny drawers, 15 drawers across in each row, and down the left side were five evenly spaced drawers, each the same miniature size. On the right side was a tiny door bearing the words: ONE YEAR IN FOUR. The actual workmanship of the chest was crude, and the drawer pulls varied from elegant crystal knobs to the head of an old wooden clothespin. It was just as she had remembered—a drawer for each day of the year and the door for the 29th of February.

She remembered Belinda consulting the chest. "Seeing my fortune for the day," she would announce solemnly as she opened a drawer and read from a slip of paper inside it. Pauline frowned slightly. She knew that there had been a sequence for the drawers, but did one start the first drawer on New Year's Day or one's own birthday? She recalled seeing the pale-blue slips of paper with angular copperplate handwriting as delicate as a spider's silk, but she had never actually "read a fortune," as Belinda had referred to it.

"Here you go, Miss Pauline," said Cindy as she brought the dinner tray. Cindy was one of a long line of college students who stayed with Pauline to help her into her wheelchair in the morning and into her bed at night. For nearly 25 years, ever since the accident, she'd hired the girls. Some were businesslike, some were kind, and several still wrote to her years after they had graduated and moved away.

"Sure is a funny-looking chest," Cindy commented.

"It's quite old and all hand-made," replied Pauline, a trifle nettled.

"Oh, I didn't mean it wasn't nice," said Cindy hastily. "But, I mean, what could you keep in all those teeny drawers? I don't think you could even get a deck of cards in one. Is it some sort of jewelry cabinet or file or something?" She started to open one of the drawers.

"You shouldn't poke into other people's things," said Pauline sharply, hearing an echo of Belinda in her own words. "You should have respect for the things of others."

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"I'm sorry, I'm sure," said Cindy in an injured tone. "I didn't know there was anything in the drawers."

"That's all right, there probably isn't," said Pauline more mildly. But she wasn't sure. That night she lay shivering in her bed. The darkened room seemed to be filling with a pervasive dread, like fog filtering through a window screen. The chest loomed dark in the faint light from the hall.

"Fiddlesticks, Pauline," she scolded herself. "You are a practical woman."

She'd been a teacher of mathematics in a fine private school before her marriage to an older man with an excellent position. She prided herself on her orderly mind and logical thinking and she wasn't going to be intimidated by a piece of furniture. She dismissed the "fortunes" of the chest as superstitious foolishness and her Great Aunt's reliance on them as a mild dementia.

"Really, Pauline," she chided herself in the morning, speaking aloud as she often did. "There is probably nothing at all in the chest after all this time." Nevertheless, as soon as Cindy had settled her in her chair and left, Pauline slowly and painfully wheeled herself to the chest and stared at it. It was small enough to reach across easily and she rubbed her fingers up and down on the sides. She walked her fingers from knob to knob across several rows of drawers, then taking a deep breath she said, "Well, let's see what you have to say."

She reached up and pulled out the first drawer. She lowered it to her lap and was only slightly surprised to see that it *did* contain a small piece of paper. She extracted it and gently unfolded it. It was blue paper, brittle and faded, and the ink was faded to a rusty color rather like dried blood. In fine penmanship a brief statement read: *a message from the past*. There was no punctuation, no capital letters.

After looking at it for a few moments she refolded the paper and put it back in the drawer. As she replaced the drawer in the chest she said to herself, "Now you see, Pauline, a message from the past. That's what the chest is."

That afternoon when Cindy brought her the mail, Pauline received a large, heavy white envelope with the return address of Nicholson, McDaniels, Glenn & Glenn. A bunch of lawyers for sure, she sniffed. Enclosed was a sealed envelope dated 25 years ago and addressed in faded ink: "To My Great Niece Pauline on Her 74th Birthday." The letter inside read:

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Dear Pauline,

I am writing this in what will be the fairly distant past when you read it and I will no longer be living. I know that people laugh at me and what they call my strange ways, but I know what is going on and I see the disaster that awaits.

I have recently written my last testament and directed that the Chest of Many Drawers be yours on your 74th birthday.

Belinda Hartford

Pauline felt a prickle pass over her body like a wave of chilly fall air. This was it then, not the chest itself. This was the message from the past, a message from Belinda.

For three days she regarded the chest with an obscure foreboding, refusing to approach it. On the fourth day she could resist no longer. She had decided to treat the chest like a calendar, so she skipped three drawers, opened the fourth, and read the slip of paper written in the same elegant hand: *a beautiful child with flaxen hair.*

She considered the phrase at length, but she could think of no blond children from the past and she rarely saw children these days. After lunch she dozed until Cindy awakened her with a gentle touch on the arm. "Miss Pauline?" she said softly. "You told me before to always bring the Girl Scouts up to see you when they came with cookies." Pauline opened her eyes and saw a lovely child, her long yellow hair topped by a Girl Scout cap. The flaxen-haired child, she thought with amazement. Simple coincidence, she told herself briskly after the girl had left, yet she felt uneasy.

Each day Pauline tried to ignore the chest which dwelt darkly against the wall, but each day she was compelled to open the next drawer. On the day the message read *an old friend's greetings*, she received a letter from a woman she'd taught school with many years before. Another day the slip said *a visitor of tender years*, and in the afternoon Sally, one of her college girls from several years before, stopped by with her six-month-old daughter.

Against her will Pauline began to believe in the chest. Summer turned to fall and each fragmentary message seemed to be like a piece in a jigsaw puzzle, defining and labeling her day. The chest seemed to grow larger and darker with each passing week although she told herself repeatedly that the chest could in no way retell her past or predict her future.

One day she opened a stubborn drawer with a knob of white porcelain. The slip said: *a recollection of deceit and guilt*. She read it with a frown and as she replaced it she heard a slight rattle. She

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pulled the drawer more fully open and looked into it, for she was now opening drawers in the middle of the chest and could reach them easily from her wheelchair. In the drawer was a ring with a single small blue stone.

She lifted it out and tried it on but it was too small. She stared at it for several minutes, then with a shock she recognized it. She flushed hotly and thrust it back into the drawer, remembering her own impassioned denials to Belinda, swearing to her Great Aunt that she would *never* have taken her ring, but knowing all the time that it was in her own shoe in the closet.

She shut the drawer quickly, wheeled around with her back to the chest, and sat trembling. "I don't understand," she said. She turned around to face the chest. "I don't understand how you knew that."

A few days later the message read: *a lie causes life-long sorrow*. Pauline searched her mind for a terrible lie, but couldn't recall what it might be. She was still thinking about it when Cindy came with her lunch. "Hey," said Cindy, looking out the window, "the people across the street got their flag out on the porch. Is today something special?"

Then Pauline remembered. Today was November eleventh; today was Armistice Day. Years ago Belinda's beau had come to take her to the Armistice Day parade in town. Pauline had been visiting and she met him at the door. "But Belinda's not here," she'd declared. "She's gone to the parade with someone much more handsome."

The next day the young man had been found dead where he'd fallen from his horse on a wild gallop through thick woods. Pauline had not meant it to be a wicked lie, merely a prank. She had panicked when the body was found, though nothing had ever been said and she finally pushed it from her mind. But Belinda had known, she thought to herself now. Somehow Belinda knew.

On January fourteenth the slip of paper said: *a marriage of convenience only*, and she realized that it was her wedding anniversary although she'd been a widow since the accident 25 years ago. Well, she ruminated, it certainly had not been a love match, but it had been a comfortable relationship until she'd learned about the other woman.

On Valentine's Day she pulled open a drawer with a knob in the shape of a heart. *a gift of pure malice*, the "fortune" read. Oh, she remembered that, all right, but the woman had deserved it. She recalled finding the monogrammed, scented handkerchief in her

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husband's pocket along with an address on a piece of paper. She'd laundered and ironed the handkerchief carefully and packed it in a fancy, heart-shaped box along with a miniature lady's pistol, loaded. She sent it to the address in her husband's pocket and on an enclosed card she wrote, in an excellent imitation of her husband's hand: "All is lost. We are discovered."

For weeks thereafter Pauline watched her husband appraisingly as they sat silently in the living room after dinner. His late nights at the office had ended abruptly and he read night after night, staring at a single page for many minutes, an impassive mask on his face. Pauline kept stitching row after row of tidy needlepoint.

On a bitter, sunny day in March the slip read: *a cup of coffee*. Pauline gasped. It had been on the day she had told her husband about the Valentine "gift." He was seeing another woman and she had meant the telling only as a warning. Instead he coldly announced that he would terminate the marriage.

"You can't mean it," Pauline had protested.

"I do indeed. I will pack a few things and move into a suite at the hotel," he said. "Tomorrow."

The next day she had stolen into the kitchen and put sleeping pills into the Thermos of coffee which the cook always prepared for him in the morning. The car crashed six miles from the house and any question of foul play was minimized by Pauline's convincing swoon at the top of the stairs when she received the news. She had relied on the policeman to catch her, but instead she had fallen down the stairs.

After several months in the hospital she had returned, still paralyzed, to the spacious house which was now hers alone. She was financially comfortable with sufficient means to retain the cook and to hire her college girls. She read many books, played solitaire in many varieties, and continued her needlepoint.

But that was long before the chest which now occupied her every waking moment. Rationally she knew there was no possibility of fortunes being told. "Merest coincidence," she told the chest accusingly. She would waken in the morning determined anew not to open another drawer, yet she always succumbed to the irresistible power of the chest.

One cold morning in late spring she opened her message and read: *a day of reckoning*. She sat staring at the rows and rows of drawers, weary and bemused. Only a few remained unopened. "Miss Pauline?" Cindy interrupted her thoughts. "Here's the mail."

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There was another imposing white envelope from Nicholson, McDaniels, Glenn & Glenn. She opened it apprehensively and found another sealed envelope. The letter enclosed read:

Dear Pauline,

By now you know that I knew many things. I should have said something sooner, but I remembered you as a child and somehow could not.

Nevertheless I now feel justice should be served and I must inform the authorities. Therefore I have written a letter which now rests with my attorney and which will be mailed to the police on your 75th birthday. I hope that the past year has served as one of reflection for you and may God have mercy on your soul.

Belinda Hartford

P.S. The letter will be destroyed unopened in the event of your death.

Pauline was stunned. The past overwhelmed her and the terrible memories she had forced out of her mind swept over her. All day she watched a sullen drizzle saturate the soggy ground. She could not eat. She shifted uncomfortably a hundred times in her chair and when Cindy finally settled her into bed she couldn't sleep.

Her thoughts were chaotic. What did Belinda's letter say? Would it be believed? Would the police put a woman of her years into prison? She considered burning the chest. She could sell it, or *give* it away. Perhaps the Salvation Army would take it. If only she could open her eyes in the morning and it wouldn't be there. "I wish you would disappear," she whispered through the dark.

"You don't look so hot today, Miss Pauline," said Cindy the next morning as she helped her dress. "You look like you haven't slept a wink."

"I'm perfectly fine," said Pauline, stiffening her back. She watched calmly while Cindy made the bed and dusted the bookshelf. After she'd gone Pauline faced the chest. Only two drawers remained. "I absolutely refuse to open either one," she said to the chest resolutely.

Nine o'clock passed and she read and reread the morning paper. Ten o'clock came and she finished her book. By eleven she surrendered. She moved to the chest and opened the next-to-the-last drawer. The slip read: *a day of preparation*.

She frowned slightly, then called Cindy, who helped her wash her hair. She filed her nails while Cindy changed the bedsheets although they had only been on the bed a few days, and she directed

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Cindy to change the covers on the cushions of her wheelchair.

What more preparations could there be, she wondered as she lay in bed that night. She listened to the grandfather clock on the landing of the stairway. It struck ten and eleven and eleven fifteen. At eleven thirty she rang the bell at the side of the bed. Cindy came hurrying in.

"What's the matter?" she asked worriedly.

"I want to get dressed and into my chair," Pauline announced with such imposing finality that Cindy didn't protest. "I will wear my blue dressing gown."

Cindy helped her to dress and move into her chair. Then she stood in front of her and leaned over. "Miss Pauline, are you all right? I mean, you seem really upset and it's weird getting up in the middle of the night like this. Are you sure everything's okay?"

"I'm fine, Cindy," said Pauline reassuringly. "You go back to sleep now."

"Okay. Well. You know, I feel funny leaving you sitting up in the dark like this. But if you say so . . ." She trailed off uncertainly, then leaned over and gave Pauline a quick kiss on the cheek. She'd never kissed her before.

Pauline touched her cheek pensively where the girl's lips had brushed it and listened to Cindy going down the hall and switching out the lights. Then she slowly edged the chair to the chest. As the clock tolled midnight she put her hand on the last drawer.

"Well," she said to the chest, "here I am."

She opened the drawer. There was more than a paper in it. The drawer held a small bundle which she lifted out. It was a miniature lady's gun wrapped in a beautifully monogrammed handkerchief. She opened the handkerchief she'd seen so long ago and studied it. How had she missed it before—the gently curved *B* entwined with the *H*? How had she not understood?

She thought briefly of writing a message of her own but rejected the idea. The mysterious chest with its cryptic "fortunes" in faded ink would mean nothing to anyone else. Let them wonder.

She removed the slip of paper and holding it tightly in her hand looked up at the chest. "I guess you have the last word," she said quietly, and read the last slip.

She folded it and held it gently in her left hand while with her right hand she placed the gun beneath her breast. She pulled the trigger and the paper fluttered to the floor.

The 365th drawer said: *a taking of one's last sleep.*

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a *NEW* Chick Kelly story by

S. S. RAFFERTY

Chick Kelly, the stand-up comic who mine-hosts his own club-restaurant on Third Avenue—Chick Kelly, the show-biz funnyman with a lingo all his own . . . Chick finds himself desperately in need of a business loan (so what's new?), and where do you think it leads? You've guessed it—Chick involved up to his monk's fringe, caught between the mob and the police . . . Keep your ears and eyes open, Chick! . . .

MONEY TALKS, CHICK!

by S. S. RAFFERTY

The signature across the bottom of the bar tab was written in a neat, clear, feminine hand. I know zip from handwriting analysis, but two things were evident: anyone named Hillaire Angevin had to have character, and anyone signing for a $2.50 drink when she didn't have a house account had to have a lot of chutzpah.

I looked up from my spot at table ten in the second-level dining room of the joint I own on Third Avenue into the ever-smiling face of Ling, my maitre d'. Maitres d' are born smiling and die smiling—it's genetic.

"Alkie?"

"No, Chick, very class. Nice head."

"So write it off to spillage," I said, handing the tab back to him. "Hell, Ling, why bother me with this kind of jazz?"

I'm not normally snappish with Ling. He's a friend more than an employee, but I wasn't in the mood for business trivia at the moment. I was sitting in the post-luncheon emptiness of the dining room, across the table from Marvin the Accountant. Sitting next to him was Barry Kantrowitz, my present partner and former agent, when I was on the road as a comic.

Marvin has a surname, but he's been called Marvin the Accountant so long that no one remembers it. There are days when you'd

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like to forget him altogether and this was one of them. Barry calls him something ethnic which loosely translates into Mr. Bad News. Marvin was living up to the billing.

"Now see," he says in that pedantic voice of his, "that's the way you think, Mr. Kelly. It's all *spillage*. Everything is spillage. The kitchen help takes home meat—that's spillage. Some gambler goes broke at the track and you write off his bar tabs—that's spillage. I swear to God in heaven, if a stickup man walked in here and cleaned the place out, you'd write it off to spillage."

"Marvin, I can get an autopsy downtown for nothing. What's the damage?"

"Damage! Wreckage! Carnage, that's what it is. The bank won't give you people another loan, period. I spent the entire morning over there. On my knees I'm over there." He turned to Barry. "And don't hand me that 'I should have cooked the books,' Mr. K. They're boiled beyond all recognition."

I felt a tap on my shoulder. Ling never pokes. "Chick, the tab," he said helplessly.

"Tear it up and toss the broad out."

"She won't go, Chick. She says she wants you to approve it. She *insists* you approve it."

"Ling, look—" I stopped myself. The rule of the sea and ginmills says the skipper handles all problems. "Is she in the bar?"

"Cocktail booth four. Chick, I'm sorry—"

I gave him a traffic-cop palm and got up.

Hillaire Angevin looked like a movie-producer's wife—the long shapely legs seemed to start at the armpits and the face was incredibly well boned and molded. Instead of languishing at a pool's edge, however, she looked very dishy nuzzled into the banquette. Her clothes were third-deck Bloomies, her dark hair was Kenneth-touched, and she was sober. Charging a $2.50 tab didn't fit unless it was a Junior League gag.

"How do you do," I said, sliding into the booth. "I'm the credit manager, but I can't manage any credit today. Let's forget it—compliments of the house. Have another. What was it?" I looked at the tab. "Dewars and water." I signaled Cuz at the bar with an infantry "gather on me" high sign. He well knows what I drink.

"You are very generous for a credit manager."

"Public relations. I figure you'll be in every day at four o'clock and spend $2.50, so I'm in for about a thousand bucks."

"Six hundred and fifty," she said sternly. "Not counting

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weekends. Do you charge interest on thirty-day past-due accounts?"

"Depends on how interested I am."

"That doesn't sound very businesslike. Did you come here to look me over?"

It wasn't said subtly or sexily. More like Marvin the Accountant. Ling was putting down the drinks. Which boils me. The maitre d' should stand around and look snooty.

"Add it to my bill, please," Hillaire Angevin commands him.

"There's no need to push this, you know, darlin'," I told her as Ling retreated. "Your tabs are no good. In fact, they're nonexistent. What is it now—four ten? I don't have to be back here till the ten o'clock show. So let's cut. By six we can be—"

"Miss Angevin!" the pedantic and familiar voice comes out of nowhere. Well, at least from across the cocktail lounge. Marvin the Accountant swoops again.

"Miss Angevin, I didn't realize you know Mr. Kelly—"

"He's trying, Biblically. Haven't you told him?"

"I didn't get a chance."

I looked from her to him and my mouth opened.

Marvin is giving me a shut-up glare. "Miss Angevin is with the Ms. Bank and Trust. Senior vice president. They are considering taking over your, ah, consideration."

I gave him a dumb look and the lady banker says, "Consideration is a banker's term for a loan."

"That's interesting. I've always found bankers *in*considerate. The Miz Bank and Trust?"

Marvin to her: "You'll have to excuse Mr. Kelly, Ms. Angevin, he only reads *Variety*." To me: "The Ms. Bank and Trust is a new bank founded by women. I have been negotiating with Ms. Angevin to assume your refinancing." Back to her: "As you can see, Ms. Angevin, the physical plant is in excellent condition and well appointed. I believe I listed the capital assets at—"

He goes on with an annual-report spiel about carry-forwards and deferred taxes and all the CPA jazz while I'm thinking: A lady's bank! Well, why not? They have all the money anyway—at least my three ex-wives do. But flippancy aside, women are usually good money managers, so why not give them a shot at the big time?

As I drifted back to the money talk, Ms. Angevin was saying, "I think the central issue, Mr. Moss, is management control."

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I found myself looking around the lounge for some newcomer named Moss till I realized that's Marvin the Accountant's last name.

"Of course it will be up to the Board, but I'm making a strong recommendation for a conservator situation—not court appointed, but in the spirit of term."

Somehow I'm getting to feel like an orphan up for grabs.

"Will you authorize my credit, Mr. Kelly?"

"Of course," I said, initialing the tab.

"That's your first mistake. That's what I mean, Mr. Moss. No credit reference, no personal identification required. *That* will have to change." She got up tall as a girl can get. "We'll expect Mr. Kelly's presence at the Board hearing."

I was not only an orphan, but I had an inkling I just got transferred to a cruel stepmother.

As she left, I motioned to Marvin and he sat down next to me. "What the hell is a 'conservator situation'?"

"Don't panic—she said in spirit, not law. Hell, in a sense, I'm your conservator now."

I suddenly got the meaning. For a year or more Marvin had practically been running the club. Someone from his office came in for the daily tallies, made up the bank deposits, and Marv dispersed all payments, including payroll. The employees have a union, so their wages were protected against Marvin's mania for economy. I belong to some unions myself—AGVA, SAG, Equity—but show-business unions don't cover items like the boss being put on a $100-a-week spending-money dole. The guy who vacuums the joint each night gets more than I do. But I can't make an opera out of it because Marv has devoted a lot of his own time to my business. It was either go along with Marvin or go over to the mob—and the latter I have resisted on numerous occasions.

"I'm sure the Board will let us go on the way we are. After all, they came to us."

"They *solicited* the account when another bank was tossing us out on our ear?"

"They need to write business, Chick, even if it's marginal. The Ms. Bank and Trust got started late in the female-banking business. The Woman's Bank got in on the ground floor and Ms. is trying to catch up. We'll get the loan, Chick, you can bank on it."

Later that evening, after I explained the situation to Barry, he grunted, "Maybe we'll get a salary raise from that Scrooge."

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I don't know what he's crabbing about. *He* gets $150 walking-around money. True, he gets the extra $50 because he has to feed his wife Sylvia, but hell, she's been on a diet since 1928.

"Don't knock Marvin, Barry, he puts in a lot of time on our account. For a damn small fee."

"You'll never make a businessman, Chick. Marvin invested his time to learn the cabaret business. He practised on us and now has maybe a dozen places as clients. Some philanthropy!"

"Don't be a cynic—and what's this *I'll* never make a businessman? Since when did you turn into a Henry Ford?"

Two days later we took the long trek downtown to Wall Street. Sitting in a waiting room at the Ms. Bank and Trust, Marvin is briefing me on the meeting we are about to attend. Briefing is his word; coaching would be more like it.

I was not to crack one gag, act flip, or ogle the broads on the Committee. To hear Marvin tell it, he can't take me anywhere.

"Stop treating me like a goon," I told him.

"Well, don't play up to Miss Angevin just because you've met her. That could be poison."

I tell you, old Marvin is the busybody of finance when it comes to inside dirt. Seems all was not sweetness, sisterhood, and light at the Ms. B&T. The review committee we were about to meet had three working members—Hillaire Angevin, Florence Salem, and Dorothy Lynn—all of them vice presidents.

"When the president, Mary Dodd Haver, resigns next month to accept a government post in D.C., her spot is up for grabs," Marvin told me.

"And each lady wants the spot. Yeah, women are like that, Marv. But so are men."

"Just don't get caught in the crossfire."

To do that I would have had to dig a foxhole in the bank's conference room—or at least hide under the long table at which Mary Dodd Haver presided. Marv and I sat opposite the triumvirate. Florence Salem couldn't match Angevin in the looks department, but she made up for it in savvy. Dorothy Lynn reminded me of a lady wrestler. Grand Dame Mary Dodd Haver looked like Bonwit's version of Betty Crocker. Let the girls go at it.

First salvo from Florence Salem: "Mr. Moss, we've seen all the figures," she said as Marvin started to fill up the table with papers from his briefcase. "I'm interested in Mr. Kelly *per se*." To me: "You have a rather notorious reputation around town."

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"Flo, I don't think that's relevant," Angevin put in. Maybe I *do* have a friend.

"I think it's highly relevant. To my mind, show-business people are poor businessmen. And that's borne out by his past record."

I just sat there like a mute. Boy, if we're going on past records—a scandal or three, my ex-darlings of the ABA, Alimony Division, some spillage here and breakage there—I was sunk.

Marv to the rescue: "I submit, Miss Salem, that before I came into the picture, things were not in order, but that's turned around now. I'm suggesting that a conservator situation should satisfy any qualms the Board might have."

Miss Salem (aptly named, she's a witch) was not impressed. "Why should we get ourselves entangled in the courts?"

"I don't think Mr. Moss means a conservator in the legal sense, Flo," Angevin put in.

The meeting droned on and on in banker talk. If I had to make a morning line, I would give odds that Angevin wanted the business, Lynn was leaning our way, Haver was bored, and Salem was unconvinced. We left with a promise that we'd hear one way or the other—soon.

"Soon" can mean a day, a week, or a year, but Marvin told me not to sweat it because our regular bank had agreed to carry us until Ms. B&T made a decision.

"The Salem broad acted a little hostile, Marv."

"She's just doing her job. Even if she balks, it could be three against one."

"I don't suppose you can schmear a banker?"

Marv looked horrified.

"I'm only kidding, Marv. How can a guy who's broke schmear anyone!"

But money isn't the only thing you need to sway someone, and two nights later I found myself using it in spades. It's called charm. At least, I call it charm. Others may have a different word. Marvin couldn't even accuse me of making the first play. I was as surprised as anyone to find Dorothy Lynn sitting at the bar talking with Cuz. When I described her as a lady wrestler, I didn't mean that she looked like the Swedish Angel or Man Mountain Dean. Actually, she had that very pretty face that Rubenesque women invariably have.

"Inspection tour?" I asked heartily.

"Of course not, Mr. Kelly," she said through a nice smile.

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Brown eyes aren't supposed to twinkle, but hers did. "I just became a little, ah, a little fascinated, reading the data on your operation. It's really the restaurant business and show business at the same time. But I know so little about it."

"The show-biz end is only at ten, midnight, and two, and I'm the whole show. I work very cheap. Say, if you have the time"—I started to hustle—"why don't you stay for the ten o'clock show? I promise it will be just for you."

"Well . . ." she hesitated. Man, I know that hesitation bit in women—it's like they were walking a tightrope—one that's four feet wide. "This could be misinterpreted at the bank."

"We won't tell the bank."

"All right, but it's Dutch treat."

"On a hundred a week I appreciate that."

We had a few drinks, dinner, and after the ten o'clock show, we danced. She was an excellent dancer. She stayed for the midnight set and more drinks and dancing. As the night passed into morning, I felt less and less like a heel because I was getting to like my lady banker.

"I hope you had a good time, Dorothy," I said putting her into a cab. "You know, I was tempted to charm you into approving my loan, but I've come to like you too much to use you that way."

"That's awfully honest of you, Chick," she said, putting her hand over mine on the cab window. "I like you, too. You're a very good comedian, by the way."

I did a Cary Grant schtick for a closing. "Well, they say money talks, but all it ever says to me is goodbye."

She laughed, a queen-sized lady's laugh. "Money talks, Chick, but you've got to listen to it. Good night."

If I didn't get her cryptic remark, I sure got Marvin's sermon the next morning. He stormed in at ten and raised all the hell a CPA can muster.

"You're a maniac! You're committable! I told you schmear wouldn't work with these people, Mr. Kelly, and I meant it. I have an ethical reputation to consider, you know."

"I didn't ask her here, Marvin. She waltzed in all by herself. How the hell did you get wind of it so quickly? Did she call you to complain?"

"No. Mort Selvy from my office spotted you two dancing like lovebirds when he came in to take the tally and night deposit. I'm not kidding, Mr. Kelly, I'm about ready to resign your account.

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You've not only jeopardized your business, but also a new bank relationship for me. I told you how things were at Ms. B&T. If Angevin or Salem finds out, we're dead."

It took me nearly an hour to cool him down. With Barry's help I finally convinced him he was over-reacting, and he decided to wait and see. I had to promise I would cease and desist in the full-figured lady department, which was a stupid pledge, since I was a man on a tiger. If she called and I turned her off, I'd get a negative vote and no loan, and if I played the game Marvin wanted, I'd still have no loan. But she didn't phone all day, and I felt relieved—until I found out that she had died under the wheels of a hit-and-run car that night on Central Park West.

I got the news the next day from a bald-headed cop named Donald Jaffee. Lieutenants of Homicide cover hit-and-runs with their left hands, so something was up.

"You admit you knew her," he said from the black Eames chair in front of the desk in the club's office.

"Met her twice. Once at a meeting and once here. She came uninvited. You know I don't know how to drive a car, Lieutenant."

He flashed a smile that could have gotten him the title role in *Jaws*. "So *you* say." Then he sighed. "Kelly, what do you make of this?" He tossed a book of matches over the desk. It was one of my club's matchbooks. I looked at it and shrugged.

"I told you she was here once."

"And she didn't smoke."

Another shrug. "Souvenir."

"Could be. How intimate were you with her?"

"Aw, come on, Jaffee—"

"I meant, did she confide in you? You're the type a woman would open up to." From him this was tantamount to Russia signing a complete disarmament agreement. I also don't believe this buddy-buddy act.

"Open up what?"

"Her problems, her worries. Did she talk about her relationships at the bank?"

I tell you, Jaffee may only have a gold-plated badge in his pocket, but he uses a pure platinum shovel when he's digging your grave. Somehow he's trying to make a connection between my pending loan and the death of one of the people who could nix it and sink me. So you're saying, that's dumb, that's not a strong motive. I agree with you, friend, but you don't know Jaffee like I

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do. Every time a homicide punches up on the NYPD teletype, he ponders how he can tie Chick Kelly in. Maybe not to get a conviction or even an indictment. Just to bring a little grief into my young life. I dealt him a stacked deuce.

"No, nothing about relationships. You say she was killed between midnight and 12:20? Instantly?"

He ignored the question. He knew damn well I was on stage from midnight till quarter to one. That he'd check.

"Open the matchbook."

I did. "Doodles? Heavy arithmetic symbols? I'm the world's worst at arithmetic, but she *was* a banker."

"A professor at Columbia, a mathematician, tells me they're statistical projections."

"Sounds like something you'd have to wear a truss for."

"Or kill for. Let's get it straight, Kelly. You go to a bank. You're broke. You lie your head off and in comes a bank officer and cases the joint. She notices things—and notes them. How many drinks served in an hour, how many tables filled at dinner. The whole picture. She works a projection and says to herself, this guy is on a dodge, and she confronts you with it. You may have been on stage when she's hit, but you've got some friends who would do you a favor."

So help me, I don't know where the idea started, but there is a myth afoot that all restaurant owners, performers, singers, are pawns of the boys in the white-on-white shirts. Hell, even my sister thinks I am.

The truth is, there are several capos who have a definite dislike for me. One in particular, named Tommy Bricks, hates my guts because I told him to get lost when he tried to buy into the club. Believe me, I'm not on a morality trip, but I know that when you sleep with dogs you get up with fleas. Suddenly, I get a very wild idea, but I filed it because Torquemada was still in my office.

"Lieutenant," I said, hoping to end it, "I know nothing about this, but I'll give you a tip. As I understand it, there was a minor war going on at her bank. Check out two ladies—Hillaire Angevin and Florence Salem."

He shook his head as if to pity a village idiot, and got up.

"That's stale information, Kelly."

"Alibis?"

He shrugged. "Unsupported, but neither keeps a car and people don't kill other people to get a job."

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"Gee, someone should have told Joe Stalin. The poor guy got to run a whole country that way."

"Well, it's none of your business, but the Lynn woman wasn't even in contention for the presidency. She'd only been at the bank for six months, and the others knew that."

I think that Marvin's inside dope in banking circles is about as reliable as Barry's hot scoops at the track.

"Keep your ears open, Kelly," old Bullethead says as he walks out. Some nerve. *I* should listen for *him*.

Well, I guess I can scratch my two prime suspects. I say *my* suspects because I kind of dug Dorothy Lynn, and it ticks me off when people kill my friends. Maybe it *was* a simple hit-and-run, but with Jaffee in charge I doubted it.

I dug into my mental file and pulled out the wild idea I had had while I was talking to Jaffee. It sounds like I've got a case of galloping paranoia, but I'm asking myself, could Tommy Bricks's boys have learned that I'd been seeing both Angevin and Lynn and knocked off one of them to sink my loan chances? Sounds stupid, doesn't it? But did you ever meet a smart street soldier? One anxious enough to please his bosses.

Okay, maybe it's crazy, but I called a number I know anyway, and talked with a lady who owes me a few favors. Her real name is Marie Izzo, but she sings professionally as Peggy Turner. What I said a while back about singers not being attached to the mob does not apply to Peggy. She made a comfortable living working in mob-controlled clubs, which is steady work in a very unsteady business.

"I think you're bonkers, Chick," she said when I told her the possible scam and asked her to keep her ears open. "Keep your ears open" was becoming the watchword of the day. "Street soldiers don't move without orders."

"Peg, my love, it's just a fishing expedition, but maybe I'll get a bite. These guys talk openly in their own group. Give it a shot."

"If I don't *get* shot. I'll be back to you."

Ma Bell time again. This time to Sergeant Kozak, a buddy, and one of the few cops who like me. He's with the Public Morals Division, and for the life of me I'll never know why they changed the name. When it was the Vice Squad it sounded like they were fighting all the bad guys. Now it sounds like they're fighting the public to keep us moral.

"The Lynn hit-and-run? No info, Chick."

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"Steve, you've got to know *something*."

"Nothing, honest Injun. The brass has put a lid on it."

"Something's up, then. Any lead on the car?"

"You know, you're supposed to have either a badge or a license to investigate crimes, my friend."

"Jaffee's putting sand in my gears for openers, and I also liked the lady."

He was silent for a second. "They got the car," he said in a furtive whisper. "Found it abandoned on West 74th St. No prints. The thief was a pro—used a bam-bam on the lock and cut his own key."

For the uninitiated, a bam-bam is a slaphammer normally used to smooth out dents on car fenders, but the bad guys use it to pull a lock out of a car door. Then, with an auto-key codebook and key cutter, they've got a key to the other door *and* the ignition.

"Ah so! I had a hunch some mob guy was mixed up in it."

"A hood, sure, but not an organization soldier. They don't steal cars. They have people for that. You want to know what this is going to turn out to be, Chick? Some punk was stealing the car to order for a ring. Maybe his first job and he's nervous and speeding to the dropoff point and plows into this Lynn dame, panics, flees the scene, and dumps the car a few blocks away. He's probably still running with a felony murder rap chasing him."

"So why the hush-hush from upstairs?"

"Stop being naive, Chick, you know the score. The victim's a swell, so they'll go through the motions, like bugging you, until some stoolie hands in the name or the mob sacrifices someone to avoid the heat over a small matter."

"I don't think Miss Lynn would see it as a small matter."

"Sure, it's a rotten break, but what can you do about it?"

I hung up, knowing he was right, and that my idea *had* been paranoid. One of Tommy Bricks's goons would have used a master key on the car. I felt kind of rotten. Even if they got the punk, they'd plea bargain it down to manslaughter and turn him loose in a couple of years.

I was glad this was Wednesday night, because I didn't have to do the floor show. I give myself at least one night off. At $100 a week I'm not knocking myself out for peanuts. Of course, I particularly give myself Wednesday night off because it's our worst night of the week—so bad, in fact, that the help has taken to having dinner together in the private dining room off the second

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level. They are nice enough to invite me, which is very generous of them. But Guido LaSalle, my head chef, tells me he's making turkey tonight as an economy measure, and I hate turkey. He's not making plain old Thanksgiving Day turkey; oh, no, they are digging into *Dindon Braisée Aux Marrons*. I don't like chestnut and sausage stuffing, either. Here I own a restaurant and I have to go out to eat. Does that make sense?

Leaving my well fed and overpaid staff to their meal, I started out of the deserted club. I was passing through the cocktail lounge when I spotted Cuz behind the bar. He was watching the store because he never eats at the club any more. His wife won't let him.

"Hey, boss," he shouts, "where ya goin'?"

"I deserve a break today. I'm going to McDonald's."

"Chick, they don't serve booze at McDonald's."

"How would you know? You have to eat at home."

He gave me a smile while he built me a vodka-tonic-no-lime. I love that guy's smile.

"Hey, you know how she is, Chick," he said, putting down the VTNL on the bar. "Sicilian women think only they should feed the family. We in trouble with the bulls again?"

"Jaffee pump you?"

"A little stroke. He was asking about the lady you were with the other night. I didn't know you like them *abudanza,* Chick. Now, my wife has a niece that's—"

"No, thanks. I never eat at home. What was Miss Lynn talking about when she was at the bar?"

"She must be opening up a joint of her own, or writing a book. Stuff like how many drinks we serve a night, peak hours in the lounge, in the dining rooms. She even asked Ling about the average turnover on tables. Kinda nosy, but a nice lady."

"She's kinda dead. She was a lady banker. That's what all the questions were about."

"Whatta we got, a run on lady bankers this week? I overheard you and Marvin the Accountant talking to that tall job the other afternoon. How come she didn't ask no questions?"

"Maybe she had all the answers." I finished my drink. "See you, Cuz. If a Greyhound bus pulls up with a gang of customers, tell them to take seats and be patient. The staff should be through with their turkey soon."

"Man, do I hate turkey."

"I knew there was a reason why I like you so much, Cuz."

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Out on Third Avenue I started walking north with an idea in my head that a lady named Suzy Marlow on East 67th Street was dying to see me. She also has great steaks in her freezer. Mostly because I put them there. Spillage.

I was crossing 60th Street when I sensed it—the fender of the black Fleetwood was keeping pace with my stride like a puppy on a leash. I wasn't being tailed, because they were too obvious, so I kept walking. In the middle of the 61st block I got the message. Another Fleetwood pulled up to the curb about a hundred yards ahead of me and two gorillas got out and started walking toward me.

When we met face to face they stopped, one on each side of me. "Let's get in the other car, Kelly," the one with the thick neck invited.

"You know," I said, turning around to get into the rear Caddie, "you guys could save a fortune if you used Volkswagens."

I poked my head into the back seat of the car. Fearlessly. These guys weren't going to snatch me on a crowded street and then knock me off. Beat the hell out of me, maybe, but not homicide.

"Get in, Mr. Kelly," a guy in the best English-cut suit I've ever seen said, and I did. I thought I knew most of the hoods on sight, but this dude was new to me. The door closed and I sat back on the ultrasuede that smelled of Zizanie. The slump sound of the door closing told me that the machine was well insulated by Kevlar Fibers. Bulletproofing gives a man a sense of importance.

"Nice night," I said. "I must have missed the introductions on the reception line coming in."

He gave me a pleasant smile and told the driver to cruise up Third.

"Walter Chattington, Mr. Kelly. A pleasure to meet you. I represent, shall we say, a special interest who would like to enlighten you on a certain subject."

Two things are bumping around my brain. One, Marie Izzo, now Peggy Turner, is off my Christmas list. Two, Lord Chattington doesn't represent middle men like Tommy Bricks. This was a representative from the top of the top.

"From what I hear, Mr. Kelly, you have an idea that a recent death was in some way a plot to ruin you. Now it may seem ludicrous on the face of it, but an accusation like that could be given some credence by the authorities. Or at least offer them an opening for harassment."

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I could have told him then and there that I now considered the idea I had foolishly discussed with Izzo-Turner as dumb an idea as I've ever had. But Lord Chattington was fascinating, so I shut up. Believe me, when a Kelly shuts up, it's an historic moment.

"I believe, sincerely believe, that you made your accusation without the knowledge of certain facts. Point one: the woman was struck by a vehicle that had obviously been stolen by a professional car thief."

"Or a hit man making it look that way."

He cocked his head in a way to suggest I was reaching.

"I feel you are romanticizing, Mr. Kelly, and your vivid imagination should be confined to the stage. You have had your differences with Mr. Bricks, but they were strictly business. He offered a generous loan and you exercised your right of refusal."

He gave a curious sigh. "People like you have old-fashioned notions about us. Violence is old hat, but we do have a problem with the *nouveau* element." Now it was my turn to cock my head.

"The *nouveau* element, Mr. Kelly! Youngsters who can't be controlled. They come in all shapes and sizes. Airline personnel, clerks, you name it. They bring in a few keys of heroin and make a quick pile, but they are not content to take their profit and retire. They try to roll it over into other areas."

I can hardly believe my ears. I'm listening to the Professor Keynes of modern criminal economics. Here is a guy who is an expert in rolling money over. Take heroin profits and loan-shark it twice or three times up and then launder it in some Caribbean shell corporation and bring it back in for "legitimate" investment. And now he's upset because others are getting in on the action. *Nouveau* or old guard, they both stink.

"Okay, so we all have our problems," I said.

"Point two should allay your suspicions. Do you think for a moment that any *organization* man would become involved in the death of a Federal agent?"

I didn't have to be told that I had a dumb look on my face. I had a double dumb look on my face.

"You can take that as a confidential fact, Mr. Kelly. She was a former Federal Reserve lawyer and was working undercover for the Treasury Department."

"Not too undercover, I guess."

"We have ways of getting useful information. You can pull up here, Jimmy."

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The Fleetwood slipped out of the traffic and I got out on East 79th Street.

"I trust we are in agreement, Mr. Kelly. This is none of our affair, and I suspect it's none of yours. Something is going on at that bank, to be sure, but the lady's death was a tragic accident and nothing more. Good evening."

I watched the big black car dart quickly away and I stood there amid the awakening night life of the upper east side, chuckling to myself. Lord Chattington was one sanctimonious buzzard if I'd ever met one—and I have. Plenty. The *nouveau* element yet. The only difference between the dumb kids who play smuggler on Air Ganja trips and Chattington's employers is that the kids don't have the clout, the payoff system, and the field intelligence that the men in the Fleetwoods have.

I started across 79th, hoping to get a downtown cab, and digested our little talk. It was giving me heartburn. If the Feds had put a snoop in the Ms. B&T, it was something big, and I'm small potatoes in that league. So I wrote off Dorothy Lynn's visit to the club as part of her cover as an interested bank officer. Maybe, just *maybe*, she had been interested in me personally, and that didn't help my psychic heartburn much.

When I reached Second and 79th I had to use some cab-grabbing strategy because there were several people hailing cabs. Since you can't take a number like in a deli, I went down to 78th, hoping to catch a cab coming crosstown. I was playing swivelhead, looking across 78th and then up Second, ever alert for an on-duty sign. Maybe if I hadn't given up on any immediate action out of 78th and turned back to Second and stepped off the curb to start hailing—

The headlights were too bright because they were coming right at me, but El Dopo doesn't get the message until I'm almost eyeball to eyeball with the driver. Have you ever seen a grown man do a flying leap? Have you ever seen a telephone pole that wasn't capable of interrupting the flying leap of a grown man? I went to black, as they say in television.

Advice Department: if you're going to go unconscious on a public street on the east side, 78th is a good spot, because Lenox Hill Hospital is only two blocks away. When I came to, a boy intern was practicing on me. Slight concussion, contusions of the shoulder, hold for overnight, the kid says like I'm a customer's overcoat in my own checkroom.

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Lying in a hospital bed with a pin in my head and shoulder is bad enough, but around 10 P.M., another pain cropped up.

"Gee, Lieutenant, no flowers?"

"How do you feel, Kelly?" Jaffee asked, moving a chair over to the bed. "The doctors tell me you'll be out of here tomorrow."

"Am I going to get a ticket for jaywalking?"

"I should have told you to keep your eyes open as well as your ears."

"I'll get along."

"Not too well, I'm afraid. I'll level with you, Kelly. I think you know more than I do about this case, so why don't we cooperate? It could mean your life. They'll try again."

That I could make book on—they *would* try again. But who and why? Everyone thinks I know something. If I do, it's a mystery to me. Here was a lady Fed juicing on me, a hood in Savile Row threads making nice-nice (or setting me up for a hit-and-run), and Jaffee acting as if he had a burr under his saddle. Okay, I'm supposed to be a quick study, so I get on the think.

I start putting it together like a Bobby Fischer looking for a poisoned pawn. First, there's Jaffee. Does he know Dorothy Lynn was a Fed? I doubt it, because Steve Kozak told me there was a lid on her hit-and-run and the lid included him. Lieutenants looking for Captaincies don't like to be left out of things that could help their records, ergo the blind-man-bluff act.

I can't prove it, but I think I spot the action. Dorothy Lynn was an insert into the Ms. Bank and Trust, but I'll bet a hundred to one she was part of a task force. Explanation for the uninitiated. A while back, the FBI and T-men and State cops and NYPD brass decided to combine efforts to avoid tripping over their nightsticks trying to bust organized crime. They trust each other about as much as sorority sisters, so why should they trust the NYPD rank and file? It's a glory game, and Jaffee is on the bench.

So much for Jaffee. Now for Lord Chattington. High-level hoods don't waste time reassuring clowns like me that they aren't players. They just waste us. (Can you beat it? A respected police detective can't find out about a task-force member, but a hood can. Some world.)

Okay, you probably see it, but I didn't.

Next morning the lady in white woke me at dawn to play plump-the-pillow and to tell me that I couldn't be discharged until the doctors made rounds, so I drank coffee. There was nothing

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about Dorothy Lynn in *The Times,* so the Feds were still sitting on it. There was a piece about Mary Dodd Haver though, announcing the appointment of Hillaire Angevin as president. Old Flossie Salem wasn't out in the cold, however; she was going to run Ms. B&T's new upper-east-side branch.

I looked up at the doorway expecting the doctor and found Marvin the Accountant standing there. He skulked up to the bed. Barry had told him where I was.

"I had to bend the visitors' rules because this is important. We got the loan. Now you have to sign a few papers and you're solvent again."

I took the papers and looked through them. Believe me, I am as familiar with loan agreements as I am with divorce papers. They were beauts, and one was headed "Conservator Agreement."

"I thought this wasn't going to be 'in the legal sense,' Marvin."

"The conservator thing? Miss Salem insisted, but don't worry. I talked her into letting me, and not the bank, hold the responsibility, so nothing's changed."

"How come Salem? I thought Angevin was the new boss."

"She is, but we'll be dealing with the new east-side branch."

"So the witch got demoted."

He smiled, and suddenly a lady in white with an enlarged red face hustled into the room. "How did you sneak in here? This man is under observation for concussion, and is supposed to be quiet."

Marvin started to protest, but she threatened to call security guards, so he left. "I'll get back to you, Mr. Kelly."

I lay back, playing Man With a Concussion, and the shock must have jarred the idea loose. Dorothy Lynn's voice drifted back to me from the cab window when we parted. "Money talks, Chick, but you've got to listen to it." That was my problem. I hadn't been listening. Now I was. In spades.

When I called Jaffee to tell him to haul himself up to Lenox Hill, he wanted it all over the phone.

"Jaffee, I might be able to make a hero out of you but don't ask me how. Just come. On one condition."

"Which is?"

"A guy from the task force has got to be with you."

They showed up that afternoon, neither looking happy with me or each other. The task force guy's name was Calkins, and his credentials said he was with the FBI.

"I'm glad you took my advice, Kelly. What have you got?"

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"Questions."

"What the hell do you mean, questions? We're asking the questions."

"Then talk to each other. Which is half of the problem, anyway."

"Is he rational?" Calkins asked. "He did whack his head, didn't he?"

"Look, fellas, all I want to know is this: was Dorothy Lynn placed in the Ms. Bank & Trust to run a pre-Government appointment surveillance on Mary Dodd Haver?"

Mr. FBI almost tossed a big thrombo and after a lot of confidential jazz and a phone call he said, "I don't know how you found that out, Kelly, but we —"

"Calkins, I don't work for the Civil Liberties Union, so don't play games. Now, question number two: Haver has been appointed by Washington, so she came up clean. So why was Lynn still hanging around?"

"To keep the cover. In a week or two she would have resigned and disappeared."

"And you fellas see her death as an accident?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Calkins sounded terribly solemn.

"Jaffee here doesn't."

That got to him, but he was used to all the ballet de interagency steps. Me, I am having a ball and a half. Jaffee's nose was initially out of joint over the Lynn case only because of the brass-bound lid. Okay, Calkins had just explained the reason, so now he was stuck with alternatives. If Lynn died by accident, he had my own concussion as one big glaring coincidence. He's too smart a cop to believe in coincidence, so his headache is a lot bigger than mine.

Calkins starts to say something, but Jaffee cuts him off. "Hold it a second, Calkins. You don't know this character the way I do. He's holding back something, but being a funny boy, he's got to get his kicks. What's question number three, Kelly?"

"Now you're talking. All right, gentlemen, this is going to take the combined efforts of your task force, Calkins, and your guys, Jaffee. Hell, I feel like a matchmaker. Here's what you have to do . . ."

It took three days and a light year of man hours, but my hunch was right. The next evening I had two new busboys working the party I was tossing in the private dining room off the main floor.

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Marvin, as usual, was revving up his ulcers.

"Mr. Kelly, I must protest! You have the loan, so why the schmear? All right, maybe a casual lunch, but this is a bacchanal. And why all three of them? Mrs. Haver is out of the picture, going to D.C. Miss Angevin is too big now for our piddling account, and Miss Salem probably couldn't care less."

"Marvin, a good CPA you are, a good PR man you're not. Maybe you should stay for the party."

"Stay! You couldn't throw me out."

Since all I ever eat is steak and eggs, Guido, my chef, is not only ecstatic when I tell him to pull out all the stops, he goes bananas with the gourmet trip from escargots to babas au rhum. Marvin had an appalled look on his face when the *gigot à l'anglaise* was served and I leaned over and whispered, "Spillage."

Angevin is a picky eater, Salem likes her vittles, and Haver doesn't drink, but I toasted her new appointment anyway. I also laid a toast on Angevin's presidency, and then turned to Salem.

"Seeing you're moving into our neighborhood, feel free to drop in anytime. I guess the east side is where the action is in retail banking."

"We have our work cut out for us."

"You know, Miss Salem, I might be able to toss some new business your way."

I signaled Ling and he brought the box over to the table. Opening it, I took out the metal object. "This invention could make a fortune, if properly marketed."

"My heavens, it looks like some sort of plunger," Angevin said. "What does it do?"

"It's multi-purposed. It's called a bam-bam."

They all looked confused.

"Is it patented?" Salem got businesslike.

"Not only that, it's got fingerprints on it."

"Mr. Kelly." Salem was annoyed. "What are you driving at?"

"Hell, that's a swell straight line. Now I say *who* were you driving at and you say Dorothy Lynn."

"What has this thing got to do with Dorothy Lynn?" Angevin asked, and I told her I'd explain it and I put the eye pressure on Salem.

"Bam-bams are great for scamming the cops into thinking a professional car thief was involved in a hit-and-run case when it was actually murder. Right, Miss Salem?"

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"What possible reason could anyone have for killing Dorothy?" Haver gets into the act.

"Well, for openers, to eliminate her from the presidential race."

"That's absurd, Mr. Kelly. She was never in contention and everyone knew it. My first choice was Miss Salem, but she wanted the 'action,' as you call it, of the new branch."

"That's what I figured, since she was the only member of the trio who didn't check out my joint personally."

"Mis-ter Kelly." Salem got strident. "If you're implying that I had anything to do with Dorothy's death, you'll be facing a law suit that no loan could cover." She started to get to her feet and busboy Calkins stepped behind her.

I've got her screaming, which is fine with me, but now I have to walk on eggs because Calkins and Company let me have my way *only* if I kept secret Dorothy Lynn's real mission to check out the Grand Dame Mary Dodd Haver. The Feds sure didn't want her raising hell with the White House. I stepped gently over the first egg.

"So sue me. But you'll have to do it from a cell, Miss Salem."

Haver gave the tabletop a ladylike slap. "This has gone too far."

"You bet it has, ma'am, and I don't like being a dupe. You see, Miss Salem is a laundress—the illegal-money type."

"Nonsense! As president, I monitored all day-to-day business. To impugn Miss Salem is to impugn me."

"Oh, you're a dupe, too, Mrs. Haver. Welcome to the club."

"Impossible. Organized crime couldn't possibly use a small bank such as ours."

"Check. How about disorganized crime—the comers, the amateurs? What a classy hood calls the *nouveau* element? You wouldn't know this, ma'am, but Air Ganja is a euphemism for dope smuggling by tyros. They sell the stuff for big profits, and then what have they got? Nothing but cash. Now they haven't got the mob's sophistication in off-shore corporations and Swiss bank accounts, so they need someone who has an 'in' with a bank. Enter our laundress here."

"Mrs. Haver," Salem said, sitting down again, "I suggest that we call in the Federal Reserve examiners to explode these ridiculous allegations."

"I'm afraid that's in Hillaire's province now." Mrs. Pontius Pilate wanted out.

Lady Longlegs pursed those movie-producer's-wife's lips for a

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moment. "Are you saying that Dorothy Lynn discovered a money-laundering situation and was killed before she could—but that's impossible."

"Let Uncle Chick spin you a plot."

"Let me spin you a libel suit," Salem zaps. "You said there were fingerprints on this bam-bam thing, but if there are, they aren't mine."

"Of course not, you're not stupid. But the clunk you sold this deal to was." I looked across at him. "Books and ledgers you know about, Marvin, women you don't. She just sold your assets."

He bolted, but busboy Jaffee had him in hand. I'd give a million to have a picture of Bullethead in that get-up.

After all their yelling and screaming accusations at each other and the handcuffs and Mary Dodd Haver beating it out of the club lest a news photographer show up, we, of course, had to explain it to Barry Kantrowitz.

"So, Chick, this bum takes complete control of our books which are doing very rotten and pumps in ganja money to make us look not so very rotten?"

"Along with the other clubs he's conned because he's got a banker who'll get loans approved. If Salem took over the new east-side branch, Marvin was really sitting pretty. The Treasury guys told me that sooner or later the bank would foreclose on the loans and Marvin would have put in his own stooges to really do the number. That's what Lynn was on to with Jaffee's cryptic matchbook. She looked at our ledger figures and then cased the joint and saw we weren't doing that good. Too bad she played for time. Once Marvin got wind of her snooping around here, bam-bam. Then bam-bam on me because he thought I went to the mob with something. I've got to stop accepting rides from strangers in Savile Row suits."

Angevin came out of the ladies room and rejoined us at the bar.

"Dewar's and water, Cuz," I ordered.

"On separate checks," *she* ordered.

"Okay, you're mad because you think I was working for the Feds. I wasn't. I just took a clue from Dorothy Lynn. She said, 'Money talks,' but dummy boy that I am, I didn't think she meant to listen to the coin going into my own coffers. The Feds went over my books and those of the other joints Marvin handled on his conservator bit. The real surprise was finding the bam-bam in Marvin's car trunk. That's carrying frugality too far. Of course,

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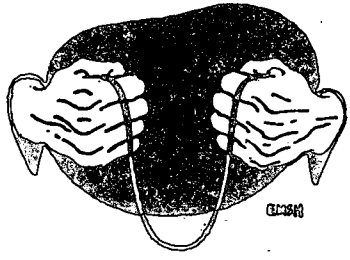
Salem was in the clear, so we had to stage a little scene. So don't be angry—I saved you money."

"That's not why I'm angry, Mr. Kelly. I'm stuck with loans to ten losing nightclubs and I don't think they can be canceled on the basis of fraud."

Hell they couldn't, but I'm a player. "Well then, you're just going to have to take me in hand and make sure I do everything right."

Look friend, if you have to have a wicked stepmother, she should have wicked legs. It figures.



DETECTIVERSE

NO SWEAT, CHICK!

by MARK GRENIER

When he finds himself caught in a hotbed of vice,
Chick Kelly is hip to this rule:
"If you want to put all of the baddies on ice,
You've got to play everything cool."

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WHAT'S THAT WORD?

by ***DOROTHY A. COLLINS***

My brother is useless. Deadwood.

Robert does have a heart condition, I've no quarrel with that. But it's not—what's that word? Incapacitating. It's not incapacitating. Far from it—I happen to know the doctor told him that light exercise was good for him. But Robert confines his light exercise to strolling down to the village twice a day to pick up the morning and evening papers. Then he exercises his fingers doing crosswords and double crostics, and his eyes by reading and watching television, while I do the shopping, housework, laundry, cooking, and the hundred and one chores and repairs necessary to keep this old house from tumbling down around our ears. You can't get help nowadays, you know. There's no such thing as a handyman any more. And if I ask Robert to do some simple job, or more to the point, to give me a helping hand with something, he gives me a reproachful look from those spaniel eyes of his and I always end up doing the work myself.

Of course, it's not just the wonky heart that he uses to wriggle out of things. Besides the digitalis and tranquilizers the doctor prescribed for him, he has a whole battery of nostrums and potions to cosset his stomach, his sinuses, and every other organ, muscle, and joint in his complaining body. Not that these myriad ills are real, you see. They're all—what's that word? Psycho-something. Funny, I can think of an off-beat word like "myriad," while the other one eludes me. Psychosomatic, that's it. I knew it was right on the tip of my tongue. They're all psychosomatic ailments. Robert has always been a hypochondriac, but with this heart thing to bolster his fevered imaginings, the doctor's reassurances notwithstanding, he's made himself a chronic invalid.

Enjoys poor health to the fullest, my brother does.

Worst of all, lately he's begun trying to foist off some of this foolishness onto me. Like this morning, when for a minute I couldn't think of the word "thermostat."

"The oven thing—the regulator—has gone haywire," I said. "I have to set it twenty-five degrees below to get the temperature I want."

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"Thermostat," he said. He looked at me slyly. "You know, Martha, you're having trouble remembering words lately. Could be an indication of something serious. You had any little woozy spells, dizziness, anything like that?"

"Oh, for heaven's sakes," I said irritably. "Of course I haven't. If I let every little twinge and tremor bother me I'd be a dedicated hypochondriac like you. One in the family is enough, thank you."

"You ought to have a checkup," he said, unruffled. "You're at a dangerous age, you know. Arteriosclerosis," he said with a nasty little smile, "is a degenerative disease, it's a killer. People have these little strokes, sometimes they're not even aware of them—"

"Oh, stop it," I said in disgust. "I have enough on my mind without listening to your silly maunderings. And having so much on my mind, it's no wonder I forget a word now and then. Everybody does. If I frittered away my time doing word puzzles, like you, I daresay I'd have a clear head and have all the words in the dictionary at my fingertips."

And I flounced out of the room in a thoroughly bad humor. Dangerous age, indeed! I felt as good at 57 as I had at 27, bar an occasional aching joint and an over-all tiredness, which was only natural considering the work load I carried around here. But he'd planted a burrowing little worm of doubt, blast him. I *had* experienced a couple of little "woozy" spells, as he called them, in the past year. But then again, this was consistent with the amount of work and worry I had to contend with.

Not that we were in any real financial difficulty. We'd shared equally in our father's estate, which included the house, which we owned jointly, free and clear, and about $100,000, half to Robert and half to me. We kept separate accounts at the bank, each maintaining $45,000 in an eight-year 8% time deposit, and $5,000 apiece in a regular 5 1/4% account in order to have ready cash available. So we had a combined income of more than $7000 a year from the time deposits and more than $500 a year from the savings accounts, which was adequate for our needs.

But for me, it was existing, not living. I'd had 18 years of it altogether, coming back to keep house for father after my marriage broke up, and then continuing on with Robert these last eight years. And it was all getting to be too much for me—the big cheerless house that always needed fixing, inside and out, the drudgery of keeping it going. And Robert. Whining, complaining, self-centered, bone-lazy Robert. He'd been a selfish, mean-natured child, and at

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63 he was a selfish, mean-natured old man. Useless, as I said—to himself, to me, to society.

I'd walk out in a minute, and I've threatened to many times, but I'm trapped, and he knows it. And he takes malicious pleasure in the knowledge, flatly refusing to sell the house and thereby keeping me buried in this backwater with no escape. Because there's no way I could manage on less than $4000 a year. No way at all.

So I keep drifting back onto my dream treadmill, picturing myself in a snug little apartment in some cosmopolitan city, with a small select circle of friends, dining in fancy restaurants and attending the theater and concerts. With Roger's share of the money and the proceeds from the sale of the house I could have a lovely new life for myself. Die, old man, I thought bitterly, have a heart seizure and die, you albatross, you incubus. *Get off my back.* Dreams. Foolish, never-to-come-true dreams.

I was clearing away the dinner dishes when I saw the snowflakes beginning to drift past the window. Oh, great, I thought drearily. On top of everything else I'll have to break my back shoveling tomorrow while he watches from inside, crouched like an ugly old spider at the window, enjoying himself hugely as he follows my floundering progress. "Good workout for you, Martha," he'd cackle. "Get rid of that flab. Put roses in your sallow cheeks." Damn him!

Sure enough, when I walked into the living room he looked up from his crossword puzzle and grinned at me. "Got your work cut out for you tomorrow," he said. "All-night snow, the paper says. Do you good, Martha. Put some roses in—"

"Shut up," I said tightly. "Just shut up."

"Temper, temper," he said, still grinning. "Always did have an ugly temper, even as a little tyke. Bad for you. Have to watch that blood pressure, old girl—you're at a dangerous age, you know."

I swung around and started for the stairs. If I'd stayed there I would have struck him. Vicious old devil. Jeering at me. Mocking me. There was something downright evil about him. What's that word? Malicious? No, malevolent, that's it.

I was breathing heavily by the time I reached the top of the stairs, my heart pounding thickly. I felt light-headed, disoriented, and the little maggot of doubt that he'd planted crawled around in my mind. Nonsense. I straightened up and willed myself into calmness. I was a victim of my own anger, that was all, and rage is a punishing thing to the strongest body. I decided to have a good long soak in a hot tub and go straight to bed, which I did. But I couldn't quell

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the resentment, the fury that seethed through me.

I slept badly.

The snow had tapered off by morning, but it was still coming down. It all looked beautiful, I suppose, if you were in a mood to appreciate it, but all I could think of was the muscle-wrenching labor of clearing it away, and the anger started building in me again. I dressed quickly and went downstairs to fix breakfast. I got out the corn flakes and low-fat milk, put some bread in the toaster, and filled the kettle for his decaffeinated instant coffee. I gulped down my own toast and coffee, and then brought my heavy coat and the shovel into the kitchen. Robert came shuffling in while I was knotting my wool scarf.

"Getting an early start, eh?" He glanced out the window and a look of malicious pleasure settled on his face. "Starting to come down heavy again. Better get going, girl, before we're snowed in. Plow's been through already, so you'll be able to pick up my paper and the mail and groceries once you get the driveway cleared." His lips stretched in that hateful grin. "Plow left a mountain of the stuff in front of the driveway. You'll have one hell of a job getting through it."

I gripped the shovel hard. It took all my will power to keep myself from bringing it crashing down on his head. I swallowed past the constriction in my throat and managed to croak, "Your coffee's getting cold."

I left him chortling over his coffee and let myself out of the back door. I stood there on the porch, my head whirling, my mind almost blank. I made my way to the stairs, skidded on the iced-over top step, and went pitching down, rolling over once so that I was face-up in the snow. And realized with a jolt of panic that I couldn't move.

The shovel was underneath me, and whether I'd damaged my spine on that, or had one of those strokes he kept needling me about, was immaterial. Whatever it was, I couldn't move a muscle. I felt the fine dry snow powdering my face, crusting my eyelashes, and I knew it wouldn't be long before it covered me like a shroud.

I needed help. I needed an ambulance, a doctor.

And I wouldn't get them. Not from Robert. Useless to the end, my brother.

Because he wouldn't be coming to the window this time. Not with enough digitalis in his coffee to kill an elephant.

So here I am. Hoist with my own—what's that word?

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"Q"

Japan's Number One Mystery Writer

a new short story by

SEICHO MATSUMOTO

Seicho Matsumoto is recognized and acclaimed in the East as Japan's leading mystery writer and the most important figure on the Japanese detective-story scene today. He ushered in the second period in the history of the modern Japanese detective story. The first period, called the Tantei Era, began with Edogawa Rampo and ended just before World War Two; the second period, called the Suiri Era, shifted technique from "unrealistic" puzzles to "social" detective stories; and in this second period Seicho Matsumoto was the dominant influence, as he continues to be in the current period, called the Neo-Social Era.

Mr. Matsumoto's novels, which epitomize contemporary life in Japan, are consistently among Japan's best sellers. He has published approximately 50 books, with an average sale of 400,000 copies each, 100,000 in hardcover, 300,000 in paperback. His indefatigable curiosity and his enduring passion to learn have led him recently into the world of archeology and history, and his studies of Japanese society and economy have been praised for their depth and insight.

"The Woman Who Took the Local Paper" is shrewdly plotted, its details released slowly to keep the reader in suspense until the very end . . .

"Q"

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THE WOMAN WHO TOOK THE LOCAL PAPER

by SEICHO MATSUMOTO

Yoshiko Shioda sent in her money to the Koshin newspaper for a subscription. This newspaper company is located in Kofu city, which is about two hours by express train from Tokyo. Although it is a leading paper in that prefecture, it is not sold in Tokyo, and if one wants to read it, one has to become a subscriber.

She sent the money by registered mail on February 21 and enclosed the following letter: "I would like to subscribe to your newspaper. Enclosed is my payment. The serialized novel, *The Brigands*, in your paper looks interesting and I want to read it. I would like my subscription to begin from the issue of February 19th."

Yoshiko Shioda had seen the Koshin newspaper only once before. It had been at a small restaurant located in a corner of a building in front of Kofu station. The waitress had left the paper on the table while Yoshiko was waiting for her order of Chinese noodles. It was a typical local paper, with rather old-fashioned type, very provincial actually. The third page was devoted to local news. A fire had destroyed five homes. An employee in the village office had embezzled six million yen of public funds. The construction of an annex to the primary school had been completed. The mother of a prefectural assemblyman had died. That sort of news.

At the bottom of the second page there was a serialization of an historical novel. The illustration showed two samurai warriors engaged in a sword fight. The author was Ryuji Sugimoto, a name unfamiliar to Yoshiko. She had read about one-half of the serial episode when her noodles were served and she put the paper aside. But first Yoshiko wrote down in her notebook the name and address of the newspaper and publisher. She also remembered that the name of the story she had been reading was *The Brigands*. Under the title there was a notation that it was the 54th installment of the serial. The newspaper was dated the 18th. Yes, that day had been the 18th of February.

It was about seven minutes before three when Yoshiko left the restaurant and walked around the town. The square in the middle was crowded with people. Above their heads fluttered white banners printed with the words: *Welcome Home, Minister Sato*. A new cab-

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inet had been formed the previous month and Yoshiko realized that the name on the banner was that of a local diet member who had been appointed one of the new ministers.

Then suddenly there was a stirring in the crowd and the people became agitated. Some of them cried, "Banzai!" A great clapping arose. People who were walking some distance away ran to join the crowd.

The speech began. A man had mounted a platform and his mouth was moving. The winter sun struck his bald head. A large white rose was pinned to his breast. The crowd became silent but at times the applause was thunderous.

Yoshiko looked around. A man standing near her was also watching the scene and he too was not listening to the speech. He seemed to have his way blocked by the crowd.

Yoshiko stole a look at the man's profile. He had a broad forehead, sharp eyes, and a high-bridged nose. There had been a time when she had thought of them as an intelligent brow, trustworthy eyes, and a handsome nose. But that memory was now an empty one. The spell the man held over her, however, remained the same as it had been before.

The speech ended and the minister descended from the platform. The crowd began to disperse. An open space appeared in the crowd and Yoshiko began to walk. The man also began to walk away—with another person.

The Koshin newspaper arrived five days later. Three days' issues came together. There was a polite note thanking Yoshiko for her subscription.

As she had requested, the subscription began with the issue of the 19th. Yoshiko opened it. She turned to the local news. A robbery had occurred. Someone had died in a landslide. Dishonesty had been exposed in the Farmers Cooperative. Elections for assemblymen had begun. There was a large photo of Minister Sato in front of Kofu station.

Yoshiko opened the issue of the 20th. There was nothing special in it. She looked at the issue of the 21st. Here too there was only the usual news. She threw the papers into the corner of the closet. They could be used later for wrapping paper.

The newspaper arrived by mail daily after that. Her name and address were mimeographed on the brown kraft-paper wrapper. After all, she was now a monthly subscriber.

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Every morning she went to the mailbox in the apartment house to get her paper and slowly read it from beginning to end. There was nothing which attracted her special attention. Disappointed, Yoshiko threw the papers in the closet.

This was repeated for ten days. And every day she was disappointed. In spite of this, she was always filled with anticipation before cutting the brown wrapper.

On the fifteenth day a change occurred. It wasn't an article in the paper but an unexpected postcard she received. The card was signed by Ryuji Sugimoto. Yoshiko remembered seeing that name somewhere. It wasn't someone close to her, but she had a clear recollection of it.

Yoshiko turned the postcard over. The handwriting was almost indecipherable, but managing to read it, she immediately knew who it was.

"I understand you are reading my novel, *The Brigands*, which is being serialized in the Koshin newspaper and I would like to thank you for your interest."

No doubt someone had told the author that she had subscribed to the paper because she wanted to read his story. The author had evidently been touched and had sent a card of thanks.

It was a small change from the daily newspaper routine. It was something different, however, from what she had expected. She hadn't been reading the novel—like the handwriting on the postcard, it was probably poor.

But every day the paper arrived promptly. Of course, this was only natural because it had been paid for in advance.

One morning, nearly a month after she had subscribed to the paper, she glanced over the various items of local news. The head of the Farmers Cooperative had fled. A bus had fallen from a cliff and fifteen people had been injured. A mountain fire had destroyed three acres. The bodies of a man and woman who had committed suicide had been found at Rinunkyo.

Yoshiko read the report about the double suicide. The bodies had been discovered in the forest in Rinunkyo. The person who had found them was an inspector of the Forestry Bureau. Both bodies were partly decomposed. It was about a month since death and the bodies were partially skeletonized. Their identity was still unknown. The valley, with its crags and deep gorge, was famous as a suicide spot.

Yoshiko folded the paper, lay down, and pulled the quilt up to her

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chin. She gazed at the ceiling. This apartment was old. The boards in the dark ceiling were on the verge of rotting. Vacantly Yoshiko continued to stare.

In the following day's paper there was a report on the identity of the dead couple. The man was a 35-year-old guard at the Toyo Department Store in Tokyo; the woman, aged 22, was a clerk at the same store. The man had a wife and children. It was seemingly an ordinary, run-of-the-mill case of double suicide.

Yoshiko raised her eyes from the paper. Her face was devoid of expression—emotionless and at the same time, peaceful.

Three days later she received a postcard from the circulation department of the Koshin paper.

"Your subscription has ended. We hope you will renew your subscription to our paper."

Yoshiko wrote back: "The novel has lost its interest for me and I do not wish to continue my subscription."

On her way to the club, where she worked as a hostess, she mailed the postcard. As she walked on, it occurred to her that the author of *The Brigands* would probably be disappointed. "I shouldn't have written that," she thought.

Ryuji Sugimoto read the subscriber's postcard which had been forwarded to him by the Koshin newspaper and it displeased him considerably.

This subscriber was the same person who had taken the paper because she had found his novel interesting. At that time too the paper had forwarded her letter to him. He was sure he had sent her a note of thanks. But now she was saying that the novel had lost its interest, so she was discontinuing her subscription.

"These women readers—they're so fickle," Sugimoto said angrily.

Since *The Brigands* was written for a mass market, the primary purpose had been pure entertainment; nevertheless, he had taken considerable time and care in writing it, and was confident it was not hackneyed or dull.

Sugimoto laughed bitterly, but gradually he became angry again. He felt as though he were being made a fool of. As a matter of fact, the story was better now than when she had first expressed a desire to read it because it was "interesting." The plot was now more complicated and the characters were engaged in a series of colorful encounters. Even he was pleased with the way the story had developed. He expected it to be well-received, and that was all the

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more reason he found this capricious woman so annoying.

"This is really unpleasant," he thought, and for two days he couldn't rid himself of the bad taste in his mouth. On the third day the hurt had faded, but it still remained in his subconscious. Occasionally it would flicker through his mind. Because he had worked so hard on the story, he felt worse than if a professional had criticized him. Besides, even though it might seem exaggerated, he felt he had lost prestige with the paper.

Sugimoto shook his head, stood up from his desk, and went out for a walk.

"That woman began to read my novel in the paper midway. Now, where did she first see it?"

The Koshin newspaper was sold only in Yamanashi prefecture, not in Tokyo. So she couldn't have seen it in Tokyo. Therefore, that woman named Yoshiko Shioda, of Tokyo, must have been in Yamanashi at one time.

If that was so, there was no reason why a person who had taken the trouble to subscribe to a paper because she had found the serial interesting would have dropped her subscription after one month. Especially since the novel was undeniably more interesting now than before.

The more he thought about it, the odder it appeared. Obviously the real reason for subscribing to the paper was not to read his novel. She must have used that as an excuse; she was really looking for something else. And because she found it, she no longer needed the paper.

Sugimoto rose from the grass and hurried home. Ideas were whirling through his head.

When he got home, he took the original letter from Yoshiko Shioda out of his file.

"I would like to subscribe to your newspaper. Enclosed is my payment. The serialized novel, *The Brigands*, in your paper looks interesting and I want to read it. I would like my subscription to begin from the issue of February 19th."

The handwriting was neat and precise. But that was beside the point. The puzzling thing was why she specified that the subscription should start two days prior to the date of her letter. In quick cases, newspapers carry news of the previous day. The Koshin did not publish an afternoon paper. Therefore, if she wanted to get the paper from the 19th, it meant she was looking for news of something that had happened from the 18th on.

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He had copies of the paper which the company sent him daily. He opened them on his desk. Starting with the one dated February 19, he looked carefully through it. He read the local news and, just to be sure, he also looked at the tourist ads.

He decided to limit his search to something which would connect Yamanashi prefecture with Tokyo. He looked at the various items. During the month of February nothing fitted into this category. He started going through the March papers. Up to the 5th there was still nothing. The same through the 10th. The 13th, the 14th. Then, on the 16th, he found the following story:

"On March 15, at two o'clock, a member of the Forestry Bureau discovered the bodies of a man and woman who had committed suicide. The bodies were partly decomposed and it has been about one month since the time of death. The man was wearing a gray overcoat and navy suit and was approximately 37 years old. The woman had on an overcoat of large brown checks and a suit of the same color and was about 23. The only thing found was a handbag with women's cosmetics in it. It is assumed that they were from Tokyo because a round-trip ticket from Shinjuku to Kofu was found in the woman's bag."

The identity of the couple appeared in the next day's paper. "The man found at Rinunkyo was a guard at the Toyo Department Store, named Sakitsugu Shoda (35) and the woman was Umeko Fukuda (22), a clerk at the same store. The man was married and had children."

"This is it." Sugimoto uttered the words without thinking. There was nothing else to link Tokyo and Yamanashi. On seeing this paper, the issue of March 17th, Yoshiko Shioda had decided to stop her subscription. There was no doubt in Sugimoto's mind that this was the reason she had started taking the local paper. It was the type of news that would hardly have appeared in the Tokyo metropolitan papers.

"Wait a minute, though," he thought.

Yoshiko Shioda specified that the paper was to start from February 19th. The bodies were discovered on March 15, approximately one month after the deaths. Therefore, the suicides had occurred around February 18. Time-wise, it tallied. *She knew about this double suicide.* She subscribed to the paper so she could learn when the bodies were discovered. But why?

Ryuji Sugimoto suddenly found himself becoming deeply interested in Yoshiko Shioda.

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He studied her address on the postcard that had been fowarded to him. . .

Three weeks later Ryuji Sugimoto received an answer to his inquiry from the private detective agency.

Ryuji Sugimoto read the report twice and thought to himself, "When they put their minds to it, they do a remarkable job. They certainly managed to find out a lot, even that Yoshiko Shioda and Sakitsugu Shoda had been having an affair."

There was now no doubt that Yoshiko Shioda was somehow involved in the double suicide of Sakitsugu Shoda and Umeko Fukuda, and that therefore she knew they had committed suicide in the forest at Rinunkyo. One took the Chuo Line to Kofu to get to Rinunkyo. Where had she seen them off? At Shinjuku station in Tokyo or at Kofu station?

He thumbed through the train schedule. He saw that there were about 20 special express and express trains from the Shinjuku Terminus to the Kofu district daily.

According to the private investigator's report, Yoshiko had left her apartment that day at around 11:30, so it was fair to assume that she had got on the one o'clock special express Azusa #3 which reaches Kofu at 2:53. From Kofu station to the scene of the suicide at Rinunkyo, by bus and on foot, would have taken a full hour. Shoda and Umeko, the suicide couple, would have finally reached the fateful spot just as the winter sun was about to set. Before his eyes, Ryuji Sugimoto could visualize the figures of the two in the craggy ravine, surrounded by woods.

Until their decomposed bodies were found approximately a month later, and the news was reported, only Yoshiko had known about them. She had been reading the local papers to learn when the deaths would come to light. Just what was her part in the whole affair?

Once again he went through the February 19th issue of the Koshin paper. Landslide. Dishonesty in the Farmers Cooperative. Election of town officials. There was nothing exceptional. There was a large photo of the local diet member, Minister Sato, in front of Kofu station.

Sugimoto pushed aside the manuscript which was due the next day, and holding his head in his hands, he sat, sinking deeply into thought. He never dreamed that one reader's rejection of his novel could have involved him in detective work like this. . .

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Yoshiko was one of several hostesses at the Bar Rubicon, a club in the Shibuya district. She was busy, taking care of customers when one of the girls said to her, "Yoshiko, someone is asking for you."

Yoshiko stood up. She went to the booth and there sat a plump man of about 42, with long hair. She had never seen him before and he was not a regular of the club.

"You're Yoshiko Shioda?" he asked with a smile.

Yoshiko had not changed her name on coming to this club, but when the man addressed her by her full name she was surprised. In the dim indirect lighting, even though there was a lamp on the table with a pink shade, she searched his face, but she could not remember having seen it before.

"Yes, I am. And what's your name?" asked Yoshiko, seating herself beside him.

"Let me introduce myself," he said, taking a slightly bent name card from his pocket. When she saw the name, Ryuji Sugimoto, printed there she gasped.

Watching her face closely, he said, with a little laugh, "Yes, I'm the fellow who is writing *The Brigands* which you have been reading. The Koshin paper told me about your subscription and I dropped you a note of thanks. I happened to be in your neighborhood yesterday, so I stopped by your apartment. You were out but I was told you worked here. So tonight I came here—I wanted to thank you in person."

Yoshiko thought, "Is that all? So he was just curious. I never read his story seriously anyway. What a character to be so pleased by one person's interest in his story!"

"Oh, how kind of you to take the trouble, sir. I've enjoyed your novel so much," gushed Yoshiko, moving closer to him.

"Don't mention it," replied Sugimoto good-naturedly; then, looking around him, he remarked, "This is a nice club." Next he looked at Yoshiko sheepishly and mumbled, "You're a beautiful girl."

With a sidelong glance at him Yoshiko poured beer into his glass and smiled. "Really? I'm so happy you came tonight. You can stay a while, can't you?"

So he still believed she was reading his novel. He couldn't be a very popular writer if he made such a fuss about meeting one of his readers. Or maybe he was impressed because she happened to be a woman.

Sugimoto evidently couldn't drink very much because after one

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bottle of beer he became quite flushed. Of course, Yoshiko was drinking too, and several of the other hostesses had joined them, so by this time there were half a dozen bottles on the table, as well as some snacks.

The girls kept calling him "sir," which evidently pleased him, and he stayed for more than an hour.

Just after he left, Yoshiko noticed a brown envelope on the cushion where he had been sitting. She picked it up, and thinking it was his, went to look for him; but he was nowhere in sight.

"He'll be back. I'll just keep it for him," Yoshiko thought and slipped the envelope into the bosom of her kimono, completely forgetting about it.

She became aware of it again after she returned to her apartment. As she undid her obi, the brown envelope fluttered to the floor. Remembering, she picked it up. There was nothing written on the outside of the envelope. It was unsealed and seemed to contain only a newspaper clipping. She decided to look at it.

It was a newspaper clipping about a quarter of a page in size and neatly folded. Yoshiko unfolded it and her eyes widened in surprise. It was the photo of Minister Sato in front of Kofu station, the photo from the Koshin newspaper.

Over the dark crowd were several white banners. The minister could be seen above the heads of the people. It was a scene that Yoshiko had actually witnessed, exactly as it was in the photo.

Yoshiko stared into space. Her hand shook slightly. One of the cords of her kimono still hung loosely from her waist.

Was this just a coincidence? Or had Ryuji Sugimoto intentionally left it in the club for her to see? She became confused. Her feet were tired, so she sat down on the floor. She didn't even bother to put down her sleeping mat. What did Sugimoto know? She began to feel that he had left the envelope for some special purpose. Her intuition told her so. This was no coincidence. No, it certainly was no coincidence.

Ryuji Sugimoto, whom she had taken to be a pleasant popular novelist, suddenly began to appear in an entirely different light.

Two days later Sugimoto showed up at the club again and asked for Yoshiko.

"Why, good evening, sir," she smiled, sitting beside him; but her face felt stiff.

He smiled back and he didn't look at all like a person with an ulterior or sinister motive.

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"You forgot this last time you were here." Yoshiko took the brown envelope from her handbag. The smile remained on her lips, but her eyes watched his expression closely.

He took the envelope and put it in his pocket. There was no change in his expression, but for a moment his narrowed eyes seemed to glint as he met her gaze. Then he quickly looked away and raised the foaming glass of beer to his lips.

Yoshiko felt restless, nervous, apprehensive.

The relationship between Yoshiko and Sugimoto deepened quickly after that. On the days when he didn't come to the club, she called to invite him. She also wrote to him, not the usual letters a hostess would write to her customers to solicit their continued patronage, but very personal letters.

Anyone looking at them would assume theirs was an intimate relationship. Considering the actual number of times he came to the Bar Rubicon, the liaison formed swiftly. Proof of how far it had developed was shown one day when Yoshiko approached Sugimoto, saying, "Couldn't we go away somewhere together? I could take a day off."

Sugimoto looked delighted. "If it's with you, I'd love to. Where would you like to go?"

"Wherever it's nice and quiet. How about some place in Izu? We could leave early in the morning."

"Izu? That sounds better and better."

"Look now, I'm only suggesting a short excursion."

"What do you mean?" he asked in a disappointed tone.

"I don't want to get too deeply involved—not yet. So let's just make this a pleasure trip. To make sure there is no misunderstanding, why don't you invite a girl friend to go with us? I'm sure you have one."

"I won't say that I don't," Sugimoto said.

"I'd like to get to know her. That's all right with you, isn't it?"

Sugimoto frowned.

"You don't seem very happy."

"There's no point in going if I can't be alone with you."

"Oh, please. That can be the next time."

"Do you promise?"

Yoshiko took Sugimoto's hand in hers and drew her fingernail lightly over his palm.

"Okay. If that's the way you want it, that's how it'll be, this time."

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Then Sugimoto added, "We might as well decide on the date and time now."

"What? Oh, all right. Wait a minute."

Yoshiko rose and went to the Bar Rubicon office to borrow the train schedule.

Sugimoto arranged for a woman editor he knew to accompany them. He didn't give her any special reason. Because she knew and trusted him, she accepted the invitation promptly.

Ryuji Sugimoto, Yoshiko Shioda, and Fujiko Sakata, the editor, arrived in Ito on the Izu Peninsula just before noon. The plan was to cross the mountains from there, over to Shuzenji, and return by way of Mishima.

Sugimoto wondered what was about to happen. He knew there was danger and his nerves were tense. It was an effort to look as though he suspected nothing.

Yoshiko appeared composed. She held a plastic-covered parcel in one hand. It probably contained a lunch she had packed. The three of them looked for all the world as if they were off on a happy picnic excursion. The two women seemed to be getting along fine.

The bus left Ito and began to climb the mountains. As they climbed, the town of Ito looked sunken and small, and before them spread Sagami Bay, the water purplish in the late fall and blending with the clouds in the distance.

"It's absolutely lovely," commented Fujiko.

Gradually the ocean disappeared from sight as the bus crossed the summit of the Amagi Mountains.

"Let's get off here," suggested Yoshiko.

The bus halted at a bus stop deep in the mountains.

Yoshiko suggested that they explore the area and then take either the next bus or the one on to Shuzenji.

"Wouldn't you like to see where this goes?" asked Yoshiko, pointing to a mountain path leading into the forest. She looked cheerful and her forehead shone with perspiration.

In some places the path was deeply rutted. The shades of green of the different trees were breathtaking. The silence was so intense that it was oppressive.

They came to a thicket of shrubs. Here there was a break in the forest and the sun poured down onto the grass.

"We can take a rest here," said Yoshiko and Fujiko agreed with her.

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Sugimoto looked around. He realized they had gone deep into the woods. Seldom would anyone come here, he thought. In his imagination he saw the forest in Rinunkyo.

"You can sit here," said Yoshiko to Sugimoto, spreading the plastic wrapper she had undone from her parcel for him to sit on.

The two women sat down on their handkerchiefs and stretched their legs straight out in front of them.

The editor said, "I'm so hungry."

"Then why don't we have our lunch?" asked Yoshiko.

The two women unwrapped the lunches they had brought. Fujiko had made sandwiches. Yoshiko had prepared *Sushi*. These were placed on the ground along with three bottles of fruit juice.

Taking a sandwich, Fujiko said to the others, "Please have some."

"Thank you, I will," said Yoshiko, taking a sandwich, and added, "I made some *Sushi* but as I'm always eating it, I don't care for any now. If you'd like some, please eat it." She held out the little box to Fujiko and Sugimoto.

Fujiko laughed. "Thanks. Why don't we switch lunches then." She picked up a piece of *Sushi* and was about to eat it.

"Watch out, Fujiko!" shouted Sugimoto, striking the *Sushi* from her fingers. His face had turned white.

"There's poison in it!"

Fujiko looked at him dumfounded.

Sugimoto stared at Yoshiko's pale face. She looked back fiercely and didn't lower her gaze. Her eyes flashed.

"Yoshiko, this is how you killed those two at Rinunkyo, isn't it? You're the one who made it look as though they had committed suicide."

Yoshiko bit her trembling lip. She looked ghastly.

Stammering in his excitement, Sugimoto continued, "On February 18th you invited Sakitsugu Shoda and Umeko Fukuda to go to Rinunkyo with you. You poisoned them just as you intended to poison us now, then returned alone. No one would have dreamed they had been murdered. That area is famous for suicides, so it was a perfect setup. People would just think, 'What? Another suicide?' and not give it a second thought. That was what you were counting on."

Yoshiko remained silent. Fujiko was staring wide-eyed. It seemed as if the slightest movement would tear the air.

"You accomplished your purpose. But there was just one thing that troubled you," Sugimoto went on. "You were worried about

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what would happen to the bodies. You left when they collapsed, but you wanted to know the final outcome. Otherwise, you wouldn't have been able to rest, isn't that so? They say a criminal usually returns to the scene of his crime. You chose to do that through a newspaper. Or maybe you were worried whether the police would call it a suicide or suspect murder. But such a trifling incident was unlikely to appear in the Tokyo papers, so you subscribed to a Yamanashi paper, where Rinunkyo is located.

"That was smart, Yoshiko, but you made two mistakes. You thought you had to give a reason for subscribing to the paper. So you said you wanted to read my novel. You shouldn't have done that. That's what made me suspicious. The other mistake you made was in ordering the paper from the 19th. Therefore, I guessed that something had happened on the previous day, on the 18th.

"My inquiries revealed that you hadn't gone to the club that day. Using my imagination along with the facts, I decided that you must have taken the 1:06 express train from Shinjuku. This train arrives in Kofu at 2:53. You would have to go to Rinunkyo from there, but it just so happened that the local diet member, Minister Sato, was making a speech to a throng of people at that very time. This was reported in the paper, with a photo. I was sure you would have seen it. So I decided to test you with that photo.

"I had a private detective investigate you and Sakitsugu Shoda, and it became clear that you and he were involved with each other. And Shoda was also involved with Umeko Fukuda, the other girl. If they were made to look like a double suicide, it wouldn't cause much of a stir. As I became more and more convinced that my reasoning was correct, I purposely left that photo of Sato for you to see. I knew it would make you suspicious of me. In other words, I wanted you to know that I was testing you. It must have made you nervous, and then you probably became afraid of me. Now it was my turn to wait for you to make the next move. You didn't fail me.

"You suddenly became more friendly and finally, this invitation today. You insisted I bring a girl along. That's because if I were found dead by myself, it wouldn't look like a suicide. If Fujiko and I had eaten your *Sushi*, the poison you put in it would have acted immediately. You could have left us here. Three minus one—that would leave another couple in the mountains of Izu who had evidently committed double suicide. People would be shocked to learn that we two had been so intimate. My wife would probably hide my ashes in a closet."

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Suddenly a laugh erupted. Yoshiko Shioda threw back her head and laughed. Then, just as suddenly, the laughter died and Yoshiko spoke sharply.

"I must say, you really are a fiction writer! You couldn't have made up a better story. So you claim that this *Sushi* is poisoned?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then let's see if it will kill me. I'll eat it all myself. Watch me. If there is poison in it, it should take about three or four minutes to kill me. If it's a slower-acting poison, I'll be in agony. But leave me alone."

Yoshiko took the box of *Sushi* from the shocked Fujiko and began to stuff the food into her mouth.

Sugimoto watched fascinated. He couldn't utter a sound.

There were seven or eight pieces of *Sushi* in the box. One by one Yoshiko chewed them and swallowed.

"There, I ate them all. Thanks to you, I'm full. Now we'll see if I drop dead."

And so saying, she lay down full length on the grass.

The warm sun played on her face. Her eyes were closed. A nightingale was singing nearby. Time passed. Sugimoto and Fujiko didn't say a word. More time passed.

Yoshiko seemed to be sleeping. She didn't stir. But, from the corner of her eye, tears made a track down her cheek. Sugimoto was tempted to speak to her, but at that moment she jumped up. It was like a spring uncoiling.

"It's been long enough," she said, glaring at Sugimoto. "If the *Sushi* had been poisoned, I would be dead now, or in agony. Yet here I am, perfectly normal. Is this proof enough that you've let your imagination run away with you? You should be more careful about making such wild claims!"

So saying, Yoshiko collected the lunch box and bottles and tied them up into a parcel, stood up, and shook the grass from her skirt.

"I'm going back. Goodbye."

Yoshiko strode back down the path. Her step was firm. Soon her figure was lost in the tangle of branches.

Sugimoto received the following letter from Yoshiko Shioda.

"You were completely right. I did do it. It is true. I am the person who killed those two people at Rinunkyo. Why did I do it? Well, there was no other way, was there? It was just the usual story of a man and two women.

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"The way he died is just as you deduced. When I invited the two of them to go with me to Rinunkyo, Shoda was delighted at the prospect of such a picnic. No doubt it gave him a perverse sense of pleasure to be accompanied by his two mistresses.

"I reserved seats on the 1:16 express from Shinjuku, but I deliberately took the earlier special limited express at one o'clock. I didn't want anyone we might know to see the three of us together. I had about thirty minutes before the other two arrived. During that time I went to a little restaurant in front of the station and had some noodles and that's when I saw your novel in the paper. When I met them, Sato was making a speech in the square.

"At Rinunkyo I gave Shoda and Umeko some sweet cakes that I had made, in which I had put potassium cyanide. They died almost immediately. I got rid of the remaining cakes and returned, leaving the bodies there. Everything went perfectly.

"What a relief! The only misgiving I had was whether the police would suspect murder. Therefore, I decided to take the local newspaper, using your novel as the pretext for subscribing to it. Because of that I ended up arousing your suspicions.

"So I decided to kill you. In the same way I had killed Shoda.

"But you saw through my plan. You suspected I had poisoned the *Sushi*, but actually the poison was in the fruit juice. I thought you would drink the juice after eating the *Sushi* to quench your thirst.

"I brought the bottles of fruit juice back with me. They won't be wasted. I will drink one now . . ."

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a *NEW* Black Widowers story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

Ananias St. John is the guest of the Black Widowers this evening, at their monthly puzzle-dinner, and the mystery he brings with him is a murder case. Now, murder is not ordinarily on the Black Widowers' menu—a lesser crime is the usual postprandial dish. But the Black Widowers—and, of course, Henry the waiter—are not daunted by the gravity of any brain-teaser.

We don't know who said it first—possibly Jonathan Swift—but one Mathew Henry (1662-1714) wrote that there are "none so blind as those that will not see." Perhaps Mathew Henry is the ancestor of the indispensable, infallible Henry; if so, our Henry has come a long way . . .

NONE SO BLIND

by *ISAAC ASIMOV*

Roger Halsted, normally soft-spoken, did on occasion become emphatic when the matter under discussion was something that struck at the inner core of his affections.

He said, "You're quite wrong, Manny. Not only is the limerick an authentic and respectable verse form, it is to the English language what the haiku is to the Japanese, an authentic and peculiar possession."

His high forehead was pink and his slight stammer was emphasized as he grew, for him, passionate. The others present at the preprandial stage of the monthly banquet of the Black Widowers fell briefly silent in astonishment at Halsted's single-handed bearding of Emmanuel Rubin.

Rubin, who grew passionate even over weather announcements, seemed afire with contradiction. "Are you trying to tell me, Roger,

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that limericks can't be written in any language?"

"Of course not," said Halsted. "I know a number of limericks in French and German. It's just that it doesn't come as naturally to other languages as it does English. They're not designed for it. For heaven's sake, you can write haikus in English; it's just a matter of counting syllables; but it doesn't have the same *effect* as in Japanese."

"Subjective nonsense," said Rubin, his sparse gray beard bristling. "It's what you're used to. Teach American children haiku in grade school and they'll appreciate it in English as Japanese children learn to appreciate it in Japanese."

"You underestimate the difference involved in the fact that syllables in Japanese are more regular in sound than those in English. And where limericks are concerned, what counts is the anarchy of the English language."

"You call it anarchy, Roger, because you don't know grammar."

"That's my point," said Halsted. "English grammar is incredibly loose. It consists almost entirely of a collection of exceptions. And the English vocabulary, through a succession of historical accidents, is far larger than that of any other language. Every word in English has twenty synonyms, no two of which are exactly alike in meaning."

"I grant the flexibility of English," said Rubin.

"Then you grant my argument. A limerick is made up of thirteen metrical feet divided into five lines with 3, 3, 2, 2, 3 feet each. There are two unaccented syllables between each accented one in each line, one or two unaccented syllables at the start of each line, and none, one, or two unaccented syllables at the end of each line. If—"

At this point Mario Gonzalo, the Black Widowers' resident artist, who had been following the argument over a martini, and was smacking his lips over both, said, "Come on, Roger, we all know what a limerick is."

Halsted said, "The point I'm trying to make is that the rules for a limerick are rigid and allow almost no leeway. We can get away with it in English because we can shift from a word to a synonym, we can alter the word order, use a noun for an adjective, and so on. In other languages you are not so free—there are too few synonyms, too fixed a word order, and the word properties are too inflexible."

At this point James Clark, the one non-member of the club, the guest brought in by the host of the evening, broke in eagerly. He had been hovering at the edge of the argument and waiting for a

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chance to insert himself. Now he said, "My favorite limerick goes: 'From a crypt in the church of St. Giles—' "

Halsted said, "Good! Let's take that one. I've often heard the second line given as 'Came a scream that rang out for a mile.' Now that's wrong! Between the two accented syllables 'scream' and 'rang' there is only one unaccented syllable."

"Not so," said James Clark, touching his small gray mustache as though to reassure himself of its microscopic presence. You can say it, 'Came a *scream* that rang *out* for a *mile*.' "

Halsted looked annoyed. "That defies the ordinary rhythm of English speech. If you were to read the line as prose, you would sound uneducated if you placed the accent on 'out.' You could say, 'Came a *scream*ing that *rang* out for a *mile*,' but now you have three unaccented syllables between 'rang' and 'mile' and that's impermissible too. So you change it to 'Came a *scream*ing that *rang* out for *miles*, which sounds better and which, incidentally, preserves the rhyme, a matter that most amateur limericists are very cavalier about. However, the phrase 'came a screaming' while permissible English—almost anything is—is a trifle unnatural. So you change it to 'Came a *scream* that re*sound*ed for *miles*' and you have a perfect limerick line."

Geoffrey Avalon's deep baritone rolled out above the general conversation, "And as Henry is trying to tell you, Roger, we have a banquet waiting for us if you'll drop it and let everyone sit down."

Henry, whose role as waiter at the monthly dinner made him the one indispensable man of the evening, said quietly, "I cannot guarantee perfection, gentlemen, but there will be roast stuffed duckling that I think you will find acceptable."

Halsted sat down at once. It was widely rumored that the only way to stop him from composing limericks was to place food in front of him, and Halsted had more than once admitted the possibility of there being some truth to that. He was a valiant trencherman, he said.

The guest tried Halsted again after the stuffed mushrooms had been disposed of and duckling bones sprouted from the plates. He said, "I take it you know the St. Giles limerick, then?"

Thomas Trumbull, scowling out of his tanned face under his thatch of white hair, said, "He has heard every limerick ever written, and thanks to his insufferable mania and our own incomprehensible tolerance, so have we."

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Avalon said, "Since you came late as usual, Tom, I haven't had a chance to introduce my guest to you. This is Ananias St. John, a cousin of my wife's but a splendid fellow all the same."

"Ananias?" said Trumbull, with a thoughtful look in his eye.

"Ananias," said St. John jovially. "My parents had a perverted sense of humor. However, the Bible is so rarely read these days that the natural allusion is lost. Well, almost so; it wasn't last week, I think. Usually, the trouble I have is in pronunciation. Which reminds me, Jeff, *please* overcome your Anglophilic love of elision and don't pronounce my last name *Sin*jon. Accent the last syllable and make it Sin*john*, or, better yet, give it the full sounding of Saint John."

Halsted said, "Elisions can be useful: 'There was a young fellow name *Sin*jon, Who said to his wife, "Honest Injun"—' "

Trumbull shouted, "Damn it, Roger, I'd tell you not to torture us with another limerick, except that you won't find another rhyme for St. John, however execrable."

Halsted said quietly, " 'I was having no fling, with that pretty young thing. Just a small bit of fatherly pinchin'.' "

" 'Execrable' is the word all right, Tom," said Avalon.

"Can you do better?" demanded Halsted.

"Who wants to?" said Trumbull. "To want to compose a better limerick is the mark of a man with micro-ambition."

Avalon tapped his water glass with his spoon, as Henry passed round the brandy in his usual unobtrusive way.

"Roger," he said, "you were unaccustomedly forward earlier in the evening. Suppose we take advantage of your brashness and ask you to conduct the grilling now."

Trumbull let out a roar of disapproval. "Come on, Jeff. Roger will get this thing turned into a competition of limericks, and I swear I'll leave."

Avalon looked austere. "As host, I make the decisions and there are no appeals. Roger, you do the grilling and the subject of limericks is not to be brought up."

Halsted said, eyebrows lifted, "I wouldn't dream of it. I've had my say. Mr. St. John," (he pronounced the name carefully as two equally stressed words) "it is customary but not obligatory to ask each guest to justify his existence, and in this case I choose not to. If I do, we may get off on a tangent and, instead, I want to move directly to a non-limerical point—"

"Grill! Don't orate!" muttered Trumbull.

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"Quiet, Tom," said Avalon, with a stiff gesture.

Halsted said, "Earlier, during the dinner, you said that few people saw the natural allusion to your name, Ananias. You mean, of course, the fact that it is used, metaphorically, to mean a liar."

"That's right," said St. John cheerfully. "Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, tried to withhold property from the common fund by lying about it and were struck dead by Peter in consequence. You'll find it at the beginning of the fifth chapter of Acts."

Rubin said, "Have you ever thought of changing your name?"

"Why should I?" said St. John. "I like it. It gives me a bit of individuality. I'm the only Ananias I ever met and that suits me fine."

Halsted said, "Back to the point, though. You also said that there *were* allusions made last week. In other words, someone thought you were a liar. Why?"

St. John frowned and his round face assumed an anxious look. "Did I say anything about last week?"

"You did," said Drake, nodding. "I heard it, too."

"I shouldn't have. I've been asked not to talk about it."

Trumbull leaned forward intently and said, "Wait! Are you the St. John who was connected with the Winston Arms incident?"

St. John said, cautiously, as though expecting entrapment, "I live in Winston Arms."

"Okay. All I knew last week was your initial. If I had known your full first name I would have known on the instant of introduction. Look, Mr. St. John, the incident doesn't exactly fall under my jurisdiction and I know of it only from some distance, but it's all right to talk about it *here*. Everything said here never goes beyond these walls, and that includes Henry, our esteemed waiter."

St. John's caution did not abandon him. "How do I know you have the authority to—"

Avalon said, "It's all right, Ni. If Tom says you can go ahead, you can. The only thing is, I do try to pick my guests carefully and avoid these damned puzzles. Ni St. John is an electrical engineer with an unimpeachably quiet life, and now look."

"It only happened last week, Jeff," said St. John weakly. "I'm sorry."

"Would you tell us about it?" said Halsted.

There was one last moment of hesitation, then St. John said, "To make it short, I found a dead man and I'm not sure the F.B.I. doesn't think I may have been the killer."

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The company of Black Widowers emitted a collective sigh.

"*Murder*!" whispered Gonzalo. "We hardly ever get a puzzle involving murder."

Halsted said, "Let the man speak! Would you please start from the beginning, Mr. St. John."

"There isn't much to tell," said St. John. "Last Friday I was leaving my apartment at the Winston Arms on a routine errand. I had a day off and my wife thought I ought to do some shopping lest unaccustomed leisure rot my moral fiber, I suppose. I was engaged in locking the door—three locks in New York, of course—when, behind me, I heard the door of the elevator open. That meant someone was getting off or going in, so I shouted, 'Hold it, please,' because one can easily wait five minutes or more for an elevator, if you've just missed one.

"When I got there, though, all three elevator doors were closed. No one was in sight and in the less than ten seconds it had taken me to get to the elevator bank, anyone getting off would not have had time to vanish into an apartment door. That meant someone had gotten on."

Rubin, who lived in a large apartment complex, said, "Elevators aren't that faultless. It might have stopped at the floor by way of a misfunctioning signal and no one either got on or off."

"As it happened," said St. John, "there turned out to be every reason to suppose someone had got on. A murderer, in fact, which, selfishly speaking, makes it just as well I had my back to the hall and was delayed by the three locks. If I had seen him and tried to get on the elevator with him, he might have killed me, too."

"What time was it?" asked Halsted.

"About four in the afternoon."

"I should think he took a big chance on being seen."

St. John said, "Not necessarily. The peephole in the door of the apartment he came out of commands a view of the length of the hall. I imagine he made sure the hall was empty before going out to signal for the elevator. Anyway, I knew nothing of this at the time. I just knew someone hadn't held the door for me and I chafed quite a bit and walked up and down to pass the time. The wait for an elevator always seems twice as long if you stand there and stare at a closed door.

"At the end of the corridor, the opposite end from my apartment, there was an apartment door from within which I heard a distinct moaning, and the door was just a trifle ajar. I called out, 'Hi! Some-

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thing wrong?' and pushed the door open a bit. The moaning was a little louder and I thought I did hear the word 'Help.' I went in, very reluctantly. Oh, it's easy to sneer, but getting involved *can* be troublesome and, in fact, it was.

"There was a dying man in the living room. He had been knifed and the weapon was sticking out of his chest—you'll excuse me if I don't go into details, but I don't revel in such things. He was a man I had seen in the elevator occasionally, and we had waited for it together once or twice, but we had never spoken. It's traditional in New York apartments, you know, to ignore your neighbors.

"I was rather paralyzed. I'm not a doctor; I didn't know what to do. I might have run out yelling for help, or I might have run back to my apartment and used the intercom to alert the doorman. But I just stood there frozen, and the man looked at me and said, quite distinctly, 'the blind man'; then his neck tendons went loose. I had never seen anyone die, but there was no doubt in my mind that I had just seen it happen." St. John paused at this point and said, "Waiter, might I have a refill on the brandy?"

Henry, as always, seemed to have anticipated the request.

The Black Widowers remained silent. Finally St. John cleared his throat and said, "I didn't know what to do then, either. How could I be sure he was dead? Was I supposed to apply first aid to try to save his life?—but I knew nothing about first aid. Besides, I also thought that if he were dead I wasn't supposed to move the body or touch anything. I was afraid of touching even the phone, but then I picked it up at one end with my handkerchief and dialed the police.

"After that I went back to my apartment to tell my wife what had happened and she took some quieting, you can imagine. Then I returned to the dead man to wait for the police."

Gonzalo said, "How did I come to miss the news story? A murder in a posh apartment house usually makes the lower left-hand corner of *The Times*' front page and scare headlines in the *News* and *Post*."

St. John shrugged. "I suspect there was an attempt to keep it as quiet as possible. It made its way through the apartment house, though, because my wife called the office. The tenants have already had a meeting on the problem of security, but that doesn't really have anything to do with the story.

"The fact is, when the policemen came there were intelligence agents with them and it was one of those who interviewed me. When I gave him my name he looked at me sharply and asked if I had my driver's license with me. It seemed to me he thought I was giving

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him a false name. I produced it, along with a few credit cards, and there it was—Ananias, in clear print."

" 'How well did you know this man?' he asked.

"I said, 'Not at all. I'd see him in the corridor or in the elevator, but I never spoke to him.'

" 'You're neighbors. You live on the same floor.'

"I tried to explain about New York apartment houses. He listened, showed no expression, then he said, 'Did you straighten up in here?'

" 'Not in any way,' I said. 'I touched nothing but the phone, except that I pushed the door open and stepped across the floor.' I wasn't trying to be funny. I just wanted to be perfectly honest.

"He looked around the room. 'Those books on the coffee table—did you touch them? The ashtrays?' I shook my head.

" 'That chair looks as if it may not be in its usual position—did you move it? And that window shade—it's hanging sort of crooked, as though it were broken. Did you do that?' I hadn't even noticed it, and I said so.

" 'Was the TV on? Or the radio?' I shook my head again.

"Then he asked me to tell my story again, just what happened, and I did—exactly as I had told it to him earlier.

"The agent thought for a while, then he said, 'What do you think the dying man's message meant?'

" 'I don't know,' I said. By now I was pretty concerned because I could see how things were going. There was no sign of a search and maybe nothing was stolen. It looked like a sudden quarrel between friends. There I was on the same floor and I could be the friend. I could have killed him and then tried to cover by calling the police with a story about the murderer going down in the elevator and the dying man muttering a senseless phrase.

"They finally let me go, but not until after I was sure I was going to be arrested. I'm convinced, though, that if my name had not been Ananias, that agent wouldn't have thought I was lying and might not have given me such a hard time. Anyway, they warned me not to talk about it, and that's it—the whole story."

Trumbull said, "I'm sure your name had nothing to do with it, Mr. St. John. The fact is, there's more to this than you can guess and that's why it had to be kept reasonably quiet. What I am going to do—if I can get over my astonishment at the coincidence of having you here one week after the event—is to tell you as little as possible, and as much as is necessary.

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"The dead man, whom we'll call Jones, was actually an undercover agent. Who and what he was investigating is of no importance to us here; but the matter was so delicate that he remained completely out of touch with us except on rare occasions and even then only by very tenuous devices about which I know no details. As I said, I was not directly involved. He lived at Winston Arms for two years, had a complicated and thoroughly established cover, and went quietly about his dangerous business."

Rubin muttered, "That kind of story book spy activity never rings true to me. Who would want to live such a life?"

"Very few," said Trumbull, "but it has to be done, it's well paid, and the fringe benefits in the way of early retirement, medical insurance, and pension plans are attractive. But let me go on—

"Somehow, we now see in hindsight, his cover was blown. Somehow he was murdered. It might have been a non-associated murder, having nothing to do with his job, but we don't believe in pure coincidence in such matters."

Avalon said, "To be dramatic is not always to be correct. Why couldn't it have been someone who came in to burglarize the apartment, found Jones there, knifed him, then fled in panic without taking anything."

Trumbull looked scornful. "There was no sign of a forcible entry and Jones would not be likely to let himself be knifed by a two-bit sneak thief at four in the afternoon. No, it had to be a carefully planned entry designed to catch Jones off-guard and it could only have been carried out by a well organized cabal."

Halsted said, "Why the apartment? Why not arrange an automobile accident? Why not have him mugged in Central Park?"

Trumbull said, "It could have been done that way. It has been with others, on occasion. But this was a special case, and in a way it was a matter of psychological warfare. At least, so we believe. Look at it this way: people living that kind of life have to be aware of danger at every moment, anywhere in the street or in a public building or in an empty place. One's own home, though, is a place of refuge. If there weren't somewhere you could feel safe, the life would become unbearable. To be tracked down, then, and killed in your own apartment, not only gets rid of an important agent but may well demoralize the entire agency.

"The question is not why it was done there, but how. Jones had a gun and it wasn't used. He was a thoroughgoing expert in the various techniques of self-defense, yet there was no sign of a strug-

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gle. Combine that with the fact that the killer had gotten into the apartment with every sign of having been invited in.

"To whom could Jones have said, 'Come in!' Jones could not possibly have allowed anyone to enter his apartment under any but the most unambiguous conditions. I doubt that *I* could have gotten into his apartment even if I had flashed my identification. He didn't know me personally and he would have taken into account the fact that my card might have been forged."

St. John said eagerly. "In that case, maybe the agent who questioned me had the right idea. A blind man could do it."

"Why should he let in a blind man, Ni?" asked Avalon.

"Why not? A blind man isn't dangerous. I know there are stories about blind men being able to get around in the dark when sighted men can't. But this was mid-afternoon on a sunny day. There was no advantage in being blind."

Avalon said, "But if a blind man isn't dangerous, why should he kill Jones?"

St. John said, "It all works out. Jones would be completely unsuspicious just because the man *was* blind. The blind man would hold out his left hand and Jones would automatically take it. The blind man could have an athlete's grip like Pew in *Treasure Island*, pull Jones off-balance, and before Jones could collect his wits he would be a dying man with a knife between his ribs."

Avalon said, "Why would a blind man want to get in to Jones's apartment? What would be his excuse? A blind man comes to the door, let us say. What does he say to get in?"

St. John said, "He could be collecting for some charity. It's hard to refuse a blind man. If Jones opened the door that might be all the murderer needed. The grip of a hand, a sudden twist, a push inward, the knife, and out again. The whole thing might take no more than fifteen seconds."

"And how," asked Avalon, "would he know the corridor was clear, either when he was trying to get in or trying to get out?"

"A blind man," said St. John, "would have learned to rely on his hearing. People in corridors talk, hum, drum their fingers, shift from foot to foot."

Rubin, with the thick lenses of his glasses magnifying his eyes into orbs of fury, could contain himself no longer. "What nonsense!" he said. "Jones wouldn't open the door for a blind man under *any* circumstances. Tom, if he wouldn't let you in because he would suspect a forged identity card, why should he let in a blind man

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who could be a fraud? What do you need to fake blindness—dark glasses and a white cane and you've got it. Jones wouldn't fall for that."

"Besides," said Trumbull, "there's no blind man who lives in the apartment house and no blind man was seen entering or leaving at the time of the murder. The building is high-security with doormen on duty, of course, and no one is allowed in without being announced."

"Well, if it comes to that," said Rubin, switching sides at once, "I live in an apartment house with a doorman and that means nothing. A doorman has a hundred jobs. He's on the phone, he rushes out to open a taxi door or help an older resident with her bundles, and a man can easily slip in. Or else, even with the doorman watching, he just waits for a resident to walk in and then enters with him, saying cheerfully, 'So how did things go?' The resident, puzzled but polite, says, 'Fine, fine,' and the doorman assumes the intruder is a guest of the resident and lets him pass without a word."

Trumbull said sarcastically, "A blind man could pull those clever tricks, could he?"

Rubin shrugged. "I said there was no blind man."

St. John, his voice squeaking into a higher register, reminded them: "He *mentioned* a blind man."

"Sure," said Gonzalo. "Someone who *seemed* blind. The murderer sneaks into the apartment house in the way Manny describes. Once inside and up to the right apartment, he puts on the dark glasses and takes out the cane—"

"Where does he get the cane?" demanded Rubin. "They're something like five or six feet long. How does he hide it while sneaking into the apartment house?"

Gonzalo said, "All right. Dark glasses, then. He pretends he's blind to get in and then—"

Rubin said flatly, "Jones wouldn't open the door to a stranger on the strength of dark glasses. Right, Tom?"

"Right," said Trumbull. "The whole question hinges on who he could possibly say 'Come in' to. It would have to be someone he knew. A neighbor, perhaps, with whom he'd gotten friendly."

"He wasn't friendly with me," said St. John. "Does that mean, though, that every person living in Winston Arms is going to have to be investigated on suspicion of friendship but with intent to kill?"

Trumbull said, "This is not a funny situation, Mr. St. John. But to answer your question, if I were running the investigation, why,

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yes, that is exactly what I would do."

Gonzalo said, "But Jones did mention a blind man. How do you get away from that? Do we suppose St. John is lying?"

"My name may be Ananias," began St. John heatedly, "but I assure you—"

Avalon cut him off with a wave of his hand. He said, "No dying man enunciates clearly or knows for sure what he is saying."

St. John persisted: "Just the same, Jeff, I *heard* it. The man may not have known what he was saying, but what he said was 'the blind man.' "

Drake lit a cigarette, squinted through the smoke, and said, "Could you swear he didn't say 'the blond man' ?"

St. John looked confounded. "Blond man?"

"Sure. It's not so different from blind man."

"N-no," said St. John. "It was blind man."

Drake said, "Could you swear to it in a court of law, under oath?"

St. John hesitated. "I'm not sure."

Rubin, who for a few moments had seemed withdrawn, said suddenly, "No, it was blind man."

"Stay on one side, damn it," said Trumbull.

"Listen," said Rubin earnestly. "The problem remains that he said 'Come in' to someone. It couldn't be a neighbor—his apartment had to remain sanctuary. It would have to be something more than a neighbor. Think about it. Who are the *only* people he would let in?"

Gonzalo said, with a wide grin, "A woman!"

Rubin grimaced. "Oh, God!"

Gonzalo, galvanized suddenly into seriousness, said, "Why not? You're not trying to tell me Jones was a eunuch. So they got to his girl friend. He would let *her* in, you bet. They'd embrace and while they're kissing, she slips a nice little blade between his ribs. Do you think it has never happened?"

St. John said, "I've never seen a strange woman on our floor."

"With a little bit of luck you wouldn't have seen the murder, either," said Gonzalo. "A blonde girl, I'll bet. Jim Drake's right. The word was 'blonde'."

St. John said, "Blind *man*. Even if you switch 'blind' to 'blond,' which I don't admit, I stick by 'man.' "

"Besides," said Avalon, "surely he'd know the girl's name. He wouldn't call her 'the blonde.' He would say, 'Fifi' or 'Tootsie' or even 'my girl.' "

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"If I can get a word in edgewise," said Trumbull. "I'll be glad to explain that the rules on sexual involvement during the kind of work Jones was doing are strict. The agents have to follow certain well-understood guides. I don't have to give the details, but you can take it as certain there was no light-o'-love in Jones's apartment."

Gonzalo said stubbornly, "People don't always follow rules."

Rubin said, "Back to where I was, then, before Mario introduced some more nonsense. Who are the *only* ones Jones would admit into the apartment? Who could get close enough to draw a knife?—A fellow agent."

"What!" said Trumbull angrily.

"Why not?" demanded Rubin. "If there have been murdering mistresses before this, so have there been murdering double agents. Besides, Jones said as much."

"When? How?" Trumbull's anger had not abated.

"Think about it. Assuming a traitorous agent, what would have been Jones's last emotion? Not sorrow over dying—he must have made peace with that possibility years before. What must have gotten right into his gizzard was the horror over the betrayal. His trusted co-worker, on the inside, burrowing unsuspected. How was it no one had seen it? And as he lay dying, he is conscious of someone bending over him and his last words were a bitter and wondering, 'They're *blind*, man.'" Rubin sat back, triumphant.

There was silence, and St. John said, "That wasn't the intonation of the words. It didn't have the music of that phrase. It was flat, strictly informational."

Trumbull said, "I don't believe a traitor was involved."

"Well, of course not," said Rubin. "That's the downfall of half the organizations of your type. By the time you can believe that any of the good old boys are bad old fakes, you've been diddled."

He went on, "Besides, it all makes sense. The guy has been in the apartment before, but he has gotten in without being seen by the doorman in any of a dozen ways. He doesn't want to be seen on the floor either. He knows the elevator can take several minutes to arrive. So he checks the corridor through the peephole, then leaves the door slightly ajar behind him.

"If he hears a noise at any door that signifies someone coming to join him in the corridor, he retreats into Jones's apartment till the coast is clear. If the elevator is about to stop at the floor, he has time to move back, close the apartment door, and still get to the elevator."

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Gonzalo said, "What if someone gets off the elevator while he's getting on."

"Two people passing each other for two seconds isn't the same as having someone wait with you in the corridor and go down the elevator with you. The trouble was that, by a bad coincidence for the murderer, St. John stepped out of his apartment door just as the elevator came.

"If he now dashed back to the apartment he might still be safe, but the elevator door was opening and the temptation was to get in and down while he had the chance. And he did that—a split-second decision that was wrong, for he left the apartment door ajar behind him."

Gonzalo said, "What a lot of horsefeathers! If he didn't want to be associated with the floor, why didn't he just walk down several flights and calmly wait for the elevator on another floor."

Rubin said, "The trouble with you, Mario, is that you live in a brownstone. Anyone living in a high-rise *never* uses the stairs."

"All very pretty," said Trumbull, "but how do you prove it?"

"I don't have to," said Rubin. "I've presented you with a case that answers every objection you can raise, and it's up to you to prove it. Don't have the organization waste its time checking the apartment-house residents. Let it check its own men. It'll find the culprit—and I hope it's not you, Tom."

Trumbull snarled, "If you think our own men aren't under continuous surveillance, Manny, you're crazier than you're always making yourself sound. We spend too much time trying to corrupt the opposition to suppose that they're not trying to corrupt us. And from the fact that we succeed now and then, we deduce that they succeed now and then. I won't say that it's absolutely certain one of our men didn't do this, but it's pretty damn close to certain. I wouldn't believe in betrayal unless I couldn't think of a single alternative explanation."

"Well, can you?" demanded Rubin. "Can you offer any explanation that will account for Jones saying 'Come in' to someone and for that someone saying something that sounded like 'the blind man'?"

Trumbull said with sudden energy, "Where's Henry?" He shouted, "*Henry*!"

"Yes, sir," came Henry's quiet voice. "Is there anything you wish?"

"Certainly. Have you been listening to the conversation?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then tell Manny he's wrong."

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The trace of a smile appeared on Henry's unlined but sixtyish face. "Mr. Rubin is, as always, extremely ingenious and persuasive. I suspect everything he says is correct—except for the identity of the murderer."

"That so, Henry?" said Rubin. "Are you telling us you know who did it?"

"The murderer's name is Peter Wanko. That at least is the name he now goes under. It would have been unwise for him to disappear immediately after the murder, but I understand he has given notice and—"

"Henry!" roared Trumbull. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Henry said, "I'm sorry, sir, but in your anxiety to impress the company with Mr. Jones's intense privacy, you forgot that any apartment resident, however private and however suspicious, will welcome into his apartment, at almost any time, a number of different people."

"And who are those?"

"Why, sir, the service staff. Repairs must be made now and then and it isn't likely that Mr. Jones will not demand that such repairs be made when they are necessary. If the opposition organization wished to kill Mr. Jones and if they could place one of their own agents on the apartment-house service staff, the rest would simply be a matter of time."

Gonzalo nodded vigorously. "Of course. As soon as Jones needed something repaired—"

"Perhaps not that soon, Mr. Gonzalo," said Henry. "The ordinary procedure would be for Jones to call the office and for the office to send a repairman. It would be known where the repairman was and when he was there. The repairman would be under instant and fatal suspicion. Even a dedicated assassin would prefer to escape afterwards if he could."

"Well, then?" asked Trumbull.

"I imagine, sir, that this Peter Wanko cultivated an acquaintanceship with Mr. Jones—took to greeting him respectfully, asking if all was well. Wanko joined the staff a year ago and there was ample time for that. As for Mr. Jones, he would be polite, I'm sure, even though he might never have learned the serviceman's name. I imagine when Wanko was in the apartment to do some assigned task, he did it efficiently, was well tipped, and was suitably grateful. It must have seemed natural for him to urge Mr. Jones to call him directly for small jobs and bypass the office. 'I'll take care of you,

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sir,' he may have said, 'and it would get done sooner.'

"And eventually, Mr. Jones did call Wanko directly. He might have passed him in the lobby and told him he needed something done and would be home at 4 P.M. that day. Wanko went upstairs with no record as to where he would be then, taking care not to be seen. Since he appeared on a legitimate summons, Mr. Jones would not hesitate to let him in. Whereupon Wanko killed him."

The silence was dense until, finally, St. John said, "But this seems harder to believe than Mr. Rubin's theory. I know Peter Wanko and he's a completely harmless person. Where's the evidence?"

Henry said, "There are the last words of Mr. Jones, which you yourself reported. You'll remember that in the argument over limericks before dinner, Mr. Halsted spoke of the flexibility of the English language and of how individual words can serve as different parts of speech. It occurred to me at once, therefore, when you told us of Mr. Jones saying 'the blind man' that while the normal use of 'blind' is as an adjective meaning 'unsighted,' it could also be used as a noun. You mentioned a window shade hanging crookedly as though broken and a 'blind man' could be a man who fixes blinds.

"Toward the end of this evening's discussion, then, I called the Winston Arms, got the evening doorman, said I had an important job that needed good workmanship, and that the man who took care of the window blinds at the Winston Arms had been recommended. 'Oh, you mean Peter Wanko,' said the doorman. 'He's not supposed to do any work outside the building, but he's given notice, so maybe you can use him.' Then he gave me Wanko's address."

"Good God!" said Trumbull. He leaped for the stairs and was back in just under five minutes. He was grinning broadly. "It's all right, Henry, they got him. They arrested him three hours ago—while we were all having our first drinks."

"What gave him away?" asked St. John.

"Apparently," said Trumbull, with satisfaction, "they followed the same line of reasoning Henry used—except that it took them seven days to do it."

"They didn't have the help of the Black Widowers, sir," said Henry.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

It started as such a simple and innocent little job—the theft of a firefighter's helmet. But it put Nick Velvet in the most dangerous position of his career—he had to turn detective to save his life. In the vise of these circumstances even Nick Velvet's minimum fee of $20,000 seemed as trifling as the worthless trifles Nick was hired to steal . . .

THE THEFT OF THE FIREFIGHTER'S HAT

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was a warm night toward the end of May, during a spring season that had been unusually dry. Nick Velvet had considered that fact carefully, together with the essentials of wind direction and distance from the firehouse, before he lit his blaze. Then he jumped back as the dry grass began to burn. Here, on the bank of the river, he knew the flames would be seen quickly from several directions.

He left his car where it was and hurried across a deserted playground toward the distant firehouse. He was only halfway there when the big overhead door opened and a single engine came roaring out. Not much of a fire, but it was enough to keep the eight men of Engine Company 24 busy for a half hour, which was more time than Nick needed.

A sleepy white cat greeted him as he entered the open door of the firehouse and went quickly to the row of metal lockers along one wall. The first three lockers were empty, but the fourth yielded what he sought—a sturdy black fireman's helmet with its characteristic curved brim to protect against falling debris. On the front was a large 24 and the name of the city. Yes, Nick decided, this would do nicely. He knew the on-duty firefighters usually left their

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helmets in readiness on the engine, but he'd gambled that some of the day shift would hang the helmets in their lockers.

He left the building as he'd entered, running back across the playground to his waiting car. In the distance he could see the firemen, lit by spotlights, using their hoses against the dying grass fire. Nick drove down the highway to a prearranged meeting place in a shopping mall's parking lot. He was ten minutes early, but Rafter's car was already there. Nick opened the passenger door and slid into the front seat.

"Here's your helmet," he said.

"And here's your twenty grand. That's good pay for an hour's work."

Sam Rafter was a stocky man with tiny eyes and a crooked nose. He existed on the fringes of organized crime, living off the mistakes and inefficiencies of other men. Nick had known him for years, and though they'd never been friends he'd occasionally taken on a last-minute assignment from Sam. Tonight, just two hours earlier, Rafter had phoned to say he needed a fireman's helmet at once. Nick had driven to a nearby firehouse and lured the firemen out while he stole it, at his usual minimum fee of $20,000.

"Why did you need it tonight?" he asked Rafter, counting quickly through the wad of big bills in the envelope.

"We're pulling a big job. I could always use another man if you want to come along."

"No, thanks."

Rafter placed the helmet in the back seat, under a blanket. "All night tonight they're cutting heroin at an apartment in the South Bronx. A million-dollar shipment that just arrived from Haiti. You know the route. Tourists on the cruise ships take it aboard and drop it off in Puerto Rico. They're never searched and there's no customs between Puerto Rico and the mainland. The stuff is flown into New York and cut for street sale. It'll be worth five million by the time it's ready for the consumer." He might have been discussing a new brand of cigarettes or breakfast food.

"And you're knocking it off?" Nick asked.

"Sure am! They're down in the South Bronx with twenty girls in a locked apartment. The girls wear bathing suits while they work so they can't sneak any of the stuff into their clothes. And nobody gets into that apartment all night, for nothin'!"

"I begin to see the reason for the fireman's helmet."

"Right! We start a little fire in a trash can in the hall—enough

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to make it nice and smoky. Then Max or one of the others runs up dressed like a fireman and pounds on the door. They look out their peephole, see Max in his fireman's outfit, and open up. Maybe they take a minute to dump the heroin into bags, but they open up. That's when me and the rest of the boys hit 'em. There's always being fires in the South Bronx, so they won't suspect a thing till it's too late."

"You could have stolen the helmet yourself for a lot less than twenty grand," Nick pointed out.

"Hell, Max was supposed to get the outfit and he goofed at the last minute. The rubber raincoat and boots and ax were easy enough, but the helmet is the most important part and we didn't have one. I figured we needed someone fast and dependable like you, Nick, if we were going to get there on time. Besides, this haul is big enough so we can afford your price."

Nick started to get out. "Okay, see you around."

"Sure you won't come along? I'd pay five grand for an extra gun at the scene, just to cover the rest of us."

"It's out of my line, Sam."

"Sure, I forgot. You're the big-time thief."

Nick Velvet drove home to the place he shared with Gloria near Long Island Sound. She was watching a cop show on television when he came in. "Where've you been, Nicky?"

"On a job." He didn't lie to her about them any more.

"You mean you stole something?"

He tossed the envelope of money in her lap. "Here. Spread it around in the various bank accounts tomorrow."

"What did you steal, Nicky? Was it easy?"

"A fireman's helmet, and yes, it was easy."

He went up to his room because he didn't want to talk about it. He was thinking of those girls cutting heroin in the middle of the night in a dingy apartment in the South Bronx, and of Sam Rafter going in after it. Nick had made a career out of stealing valueless objects because he'd always figured nobody got hurt. But he knew tonight he might be wrong. A great many people could get hurt, and he didn't want to think about it.

The following morning he looked in the papers, but there was nothing. He had to wait till the television news that evening for a brief story devoid of details. A shootout they called it in the jargon of newscasters, making it sound like some fun-filled scene from a Western movie. A shootout in the South Bronx had left a nineteen-

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year-old Puerto Rican girl dead and several others wounded. Police were investigating the motive for the crime.

There was no mention of heroin, and Nick could only assume that Sam Rafter's raid had been a success.

Nick's theft at the firehouse had taken place on a Thursday night. On the following Monday, as he was preparing to launch his ketch for the first sail of the season, a slim balding man approached him at dockside. "You Nick Velvet?"

Nick eyed him up and down, sensing trouble. "That's me."

"I'm Detective Sergeant Knowles. I'm going to have to ask you to come along with me for questioning."

"Questioning for what?"

"Well, it could be murder. It's my job to find out. I want to advise you of your right to have an attorney present during questioning and to remain silent if you so desire. Any statement you make may be used against—"

"What in hell is this?" Nick demanded. "Am I being arrested?"

"Not at the present time."

It was like a bad dream. The mention of murder had conjured up a vision of that dead Puerto Rican girl in the Bronx. Could that be what it was about? "What murder are we talking about? I don't even know anyone who's died recently."

"A firefighter named Vince Agnosti."

"Who?"

"Come along, Mr. Velvet. Don't make my job more difficult than it is."

Nick phoned Gloria from the police station and said he'd keep her informed. Then he followed Sergeant Knowles into the interrogation room. A secretary and another detective were already there.

"You'd better start at the beginning," Nick told them. "I know nothing about any of this."

"All right," Knowles said. "On Friday evening there was a fire in a warehouse down by the docks. Maybe you read about it."

Nick remembered the story. "A fireman died."

"We call them firefighters now. His name was Vince Agnosti and he was wearing an oxygen mask because of the dense smoke. The device is supplied by an air tank worn on the back and contains enough oxygen for thirty minutes of normal breathing. Under the stress of fighting a fire, this can sometimes be used up in fifteen minutes. The air tank has a regulator valve and a gauge showing

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the amount of air remaining in the tank. Vince Agnosti suffocated because his air ran out while he was inside the burning warehouse. We discovered the gauge had been stuck in a fixed position so it registered more air than the tank contained. We believe the tank was deliberately emptied until it could support life for no more than five minutes."

"What are you trying to tell me?" Nick asked.

"That Vince Agnosti was deliberately killed."

"Even if it's true how does it concern me?"

"Someone had to enter that firehouse and tamper with the air tank. We found a fresh fingerprint on one of the locker doors that matches your prints in our file."

"I know nothing about it," Nick replied.

"Do you deny you were in that firehouse during the past several days?"

"I deny I tampered with any air tank. I never knew Vince Agnosti and I had nothing to do with his death."

Until then Sergeant Knowles had conducted the session in a calm businesslike manner. But now he studied Nick anew with his searching eyes and finally turned to the other detective and the stenographer. "Leave us alone for a minute."

Nick knew that was mainly for effect, since the room was probably bugged, but he waited for the detective's next move. It came quickly. "You're a thief, Velvet. The department's been watching you for years and we've got a file on you three inches thick. The only reason you're not behind bars is that you usually operate outside our jurisdiction, and the things you steal aren't of any great value. But we're going to nail you for this one!"

"Even if I admitted your charge that I'm a thief, Sergeant, that doesn't make me a murderer."

"You hire out your services. If someone pays you money to steal, maybe someone else could pay you money to tamper with an air tank."

"No," Nick said. "Never." But he was remembering the dead Puerto Rican girl. He could not admit the real reason for his firehouse visit without implicating himself in that death. He silently cursed his oversight in leaving the fingerprint. He hadn't worn gloves in the firehouse, on the theory that a man found wearing gloves on a warm night was immediately suspicious; but he'd tried to be careful while opening the lockers. Obviously he hadn't been careful enough. In the past his thefts had been so valueless that the police were rarely

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summoned. This time, by a trick of fate, his fingerprint had linked him to a completely unconnected crime.

"If you're innocent you'll tell me what you were doing in that firehouse. Fingerprints don't lie."

Nick took a deep breath. "I was there for a client. But it had nothing to do with this man Agnosti, and I never even saw an air tank."

"If that's the truth you'll tell me what you stole, and for whom."

Nick saw the charge of accessory to murder staring him in the face. There seemed no way out of the situation that had entrapped him. "Give me forty-eight hours," he said finally. "I'll find the person who killed Vince Agnosti."

The detective's mouth twisted into a smirk. "That's what we're trying to do—remember?"

"But all you've got is me. You can prove I was in the firehouse, but you can't supply a motive and you can't prove I ever touched that air tank. You've got no case."

Sergeant Knowles considered that. "Who will you give me in forty-eight hours?" he asked finally. "The man who hired you?"

"No. Nobody hired me to kill a fireman." Nick hurried on, feeling he might have a bargaining point. "Look here, turn me loose for forty-eight hours and take a chance. You'll still have your fingerprint. You can still press charges against me. And if I try to run away you'll have a stronger case than you have now. Flight to avoid prosecution can be considered evidence of guilt."

"You think you're a better detective than we are?"

"No, but sometimes private inquiries can get further than official ones. Give me a chance—you've got nothing to lose."

"Maybe you just want to tip off the man who hired you."

"I could do that with a phone call from jail, if I really wanted to."

Sergeant Knowles sighed and stood up. "All right, Velvet—forty-eight hours. But don't be surprised if we have a man on your tail."

Nick left police headquarters with a jaunty step, feeling like a man reprieved from a death sentence. The reprieve was only a temporary one, and he had no idea how he'd find the killer of Vince Agnosti. But he'd worry about that later.

Nick had somehow expected to speak with a fire chief, but there was no chief at Engine Company 24. "The chiefs come from downtown," Lieutenant Fidley explained. "Sometimes the fire's out by the time they get there, but we have to wait for them anyway. Big

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cities have chiefs and fire marshals and battalion commanders, but up here you settle for a lieutenant and be happy you got him. Most of the smaller towns in the county have volunteer firemen."

Fidley was a gruff dedicated man of the sort Nick liked to encounter. Gazing deep into his hard blue eyes one could almost see reflections of the fires he'd fought. "I'm doing a feature on the fireman who died," Nick said, having identified himself as a reporter. "What can you tell me about him?"

"I talked to enough people already," Fidley replied. "Go read about it in the papers."

"I think I can write it up from a new angle," Nick argued. "Just what happened the night he died?"

"It was an accident, pure and simple, like we've been saying all along. The air packs aren't issued to individual firefighters like helmets or raincoats. They're kept in a special compartment on the truck. There are four of them and only one was defective. It's impossible that anyone could have tampered with it to cause Vince's death because no one would have known he'd use that particular one. It was some intern at the hospital that noticed the gauge was stuck and told the policeman who came in with Vince. He was dead on arrival and the intern and the cop had nothing better to do than dream up a crazy theory that he was murdered."

"But I understand that the air tanks should be good for thirty minutes."

"It's sometimes much less under exhausting working conditions. And when you're lugging a seventy-one-pound length of hose or chopping a hole in a smoldering roof it can be mighty exhausting!"

"Then you're satisfied it was an accident?"

"Certainly—it couldn't be anything else. The police are chasing their tails on this. They were even over here taking fingerprints."

"I know," Nick murmured. "Look, can I speak to the rest of the men?"

"Sure, if you want. There are only eight of us on a shift here, and Vince hasn't been replaced yet. The other six are out here."

He led Nick past the traditional brass pole to the back of the firehouse where two men were playing ping-pong while the other four watched or read. The two at the ping-pong table were identified as Bennett and Wifer, while the others were introduced to Nick as Thorn, Jones, Lake, and Molley. They were all young and well-built. Jones was black and Wifer wore a slight mustache. Otherwise they could have been interchangeable.

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"I'm looking into the death of Vince Agnosti for my paper," Nick told them. "The lieutenant here has been very helpful but he tells me there's no way the death could have been anything but an accident. Do you fellows agree?"

"It's a dangerous business," Thorn said. "Accidents happen."

"Was anyone else using an air pack that night?"

"I was," Jones said. "And so was the lieutenant. It was a bad fire."

"But the air packs were picked at random? Vince didn't get one assigned to him?"

"Any of us might have gotten it," Wifer said. He and Bennett went back to their game.

"Has anything unusual happened around the firehouse lately? Especially in the past week or so?"

Bennett smacked the ping-pong ball, driving it past Wifer. "One of the men on the day shift claims his helmet was stolen." He chuckled. "Who in hell would want to steal a fireman's helmet?"

"Who indeed?" Nick made a few notes on his pad. "Did Vince leave a family? The paper said he was unmarried."

"Divorced," Lieutenant Fidley said. "He lived alone in an apartment over on West Street. You want to talk to his ex-wife? Maybe she could tell you about him."

Nick really didn't think she could help him, but he pretended interest and jotted down her name and address. When he left the firehouse and went out into the evening air, he had no idea at all of how to proceed. One of those seven men could have arranged to give Agnosti the defective air pack, but it seemed unlikely. Both motive and opportunity were lacking.

Nick was at a dead end, unless he could convince Sergeant Knowles that the death had been accidental.

He decided to call on the dead man's former wife, because he could think of no better course of action.

Lisa Agnosti still used her married name, though it was clear at once that she harbored no love for her dead husband. "Vince was no good," she told Nick later that evening, sitting at the kitchen table in a little third-floor flat a few blocks from the firehouse. "I went to his funeral but that was it. I'm not sorry he's gone."

She was a plain woman in her early thirties, not unattractive but with an indifference to her appearance that seemed to give her a washed-out look. "How was he no good?" Nick asked. "Could you tell me anything more specific?"

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"He always had shady deals going. I told him with both of us working there was no need for him to be doing the things he did, but he wouldn't listen. Finally I just left him. Money got to be all he thought about."

"What sort of shady deals?"

She was reluctant to say at first. "I don't want this in the papers. After all, the guy is dead."

"Will you tell me if I promise not to print it?" Nick asked, dramatically flipping shut his notebook. "It'll give me a good background insight into the man."

Lisa Agnosti nervously lit a cigarette. "God, I don't know. I don't want to get myself in a jam."

"You have my word."

"He was doing jobs for people. Mostly down in the Bronx but sometimes up here too."

"What sort of jobs? For what people?"

She twisted her mouth into a painful expression. "You know, like his work. Only not really like it at all, I suppose."

"What?"

Her voice dropped to an embarrassed whisper. "He set fires for people."

"Arson?" The thought numbed Nick for an instant.

She nodded. "We never used that word. He called it all sorts of other things but never arson. He'd do it for people who wanted to collect on the insurance. He told me he never burned a building with people inside."

"Who did he work for?" Nick asked. His mind was spinning. Agnosti might have been killed to prevent his talking about the arson.

"Mostly he got the jobs through some underworld figure in the Bronx. I never knew his full name."

"Vince must have called him something."

"I'm trying to remember . . . I think—I'm not sure—but I think it was someone named Max."

Max.

One of Sam Rafter's men was named Max.

It had been Max who'd failed to come up with the fireman's outfit he was supposed to deliver.

Could it possibly be the same Max?

"Thank you, Mrs. Agnosti," Nick said, getting to his feet. "You've been a big help."

"You know," she remarked, seeing him to the door, "the thing

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that always troubled me was what made him do it. Oh, the money, sure—but what I mean is, how could he work at putting out fires every night and then go and start them? Sometimes I think he must have been crazy."

"I know what you mean," Nick said.

He spent most of the next day tracking down the man named Max in the South Bronx. He looked for him in the most likely spots, in the burned-out blocks and leveled neighborhoods where arsonists had worked for years. Sometimes they'd been vandals, sometimes owners seeking insurance, occasionally militants crying for social justice—but the result was always the same. A city was dying, and a few miles south in Manhattan most people were only vaguely aware of it. They saw it on the evening news, or in the papers when the President came to inspect it, but it could have been a bombed-out city a world away.

Nick Velvet walked through the rubble and asked about Sam Rafter. When he found the area where Sam's name was known, he began to ask about the man named Max.

It took a while before he found the reply he sought. "You must mean Max Winkle," the proprietor of a cigar store told him. "He comes in here with Sam sometimes."

"Where can I find him?" Nick passed the man a five-dollar bill.

"Hell, I don't know." The man lowered his voice. "Since that trouble last week Sam and Max haven't been around."

Nick nodded. "The girl who was killed in the apartment."

"That's it. I hear they was cuttin' heroin up there when some hijackers got in."

"How'd they manage that?"

"One guy was dressed like a fireman, and they got some trash burnin' in the hall."

"Were Sam and Max involved?"

"Hell, I don't know," the man replied, suddenly nervous. "I just mentioned that they ain't been around."

"Thanks," Nick said.

He hit a couple of bars down in the next block, asking for Max Winkle. Nobody'd seen him, or at least they wouldn't admit they had. It was growing late in the afternoon when Nick decided he had to resort to drastic action if he was going to beat Sergeant Knowles's deadline. He phoned the private number he had for Sam Rafter. A young woman answered and told him Sam had gone to Florida.

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"On the first of June?" Nick asked. "Since when does Sam go to Florida on the first of June?"

"Well, that's where he is," the woman insisted.

"How about Max Winkle? Can I speak to him?"

"I don't know any Max Winkle."

Nick sighed into the phone. "Look, you get in touch with them, see? Tell them Nick Velvet has to talk to Max. It's important."

He hung up and drove back home. He'd done all that he could for the moment.

It was much later in the evening, sometime after ten, when the call came from Sam Rafter. "I hear you've been asking around for Max," he said. "What's up?"

"I have to talk to him, Sam."

"What about?"

"Some of his business. Maybe it's your business too, but I'm sure you don't want to go into it over the phone."

"Can you meet me in an hour, usual place?"

"You got back fast from Florida."

"What?"

"Never mind. I'll be there."

Rafter's car was parked in its usual spot. Nick left his car at the other end of the lot and walked over. Rafter was sitting alone behind the wheel, smoking a cigarette, and Nick slid into the seat next to him.

"Now what are you up to with Max?" Rafter asked.

"I've never met the man. But I understand he's had dealings with a fellow named Vince Agnosti who died last week."

"What sort of dealings?"

"Arson for hire, in the South Bronx. I'm on a spot with the police up here, Sam. They think somebody killed Agnosti, and they'd like to pin it on me."

"Why you?"

"He was a fireman and they found my fingerprint at the firehouse."

"Tough luck, Nick. I thought you were smarter than that." He chuckled a bit. "Big-time thief!"

"If Agnosti and Max were working together maybe Max knows something about his death."

"How do you know Max was involved with him?"

"Agnosti's ex-wife says he did some arson jobs in the South Bronx

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for a guy named Max."

"You know how many guys named Max there are in the South Bronx?"

"Your Max was supposed to get you the fireman's outfit. You told me that much. He couldn't get it from Agnosti, so you thought of me because I lived in the area. I picked that firehouse because it was close to my home—the same reason you thought of me in connection with the helmet. It was a coincidence that I picked the same firehouse, but an understandable coincidence under the circumstances."

"So you think Max is involved."

"I'm sure of it," Nick said, and at that instant he felt the cold muzzle of a gun against the back of his neck.

"You shoulda looked in the back seat," a voice behind him said. "Then you coulda included me in your conversation."

Nick stayed very still. "Max Winkle?"

"That's right. Get his gun, Sam."

Rafter chuckled. "I doubt if Nick Velvet even carries a gun. Do you, Nick?"

"I left it in my other suit."

Max kept the gun at the back of his neck, but Rafter continued the conversation. "Now what do you want, Nick?"

"I'm on the spot with the local cops."

"You're on the spot with Max too right now."

"Damn right!" Max said. "I'm not takin' the rap for Agnosti."

"Tell me one thing. Why couldn't you get the fireman's helmet from him last week? Why did Sam have to come to me?"

He could smell Max's breath as the man replied. "Vince got worried. He was afraid they found out at the firehouse what he was doing. He lost a notebook where he'd listed all the jobs he did for me. He was so worried he didn't dare let me borrow a helmet."

"What did you do with the one I took?"

Sam Rafter answered. "We dumped the whole outfit in some trash afterward. We couldn't take a chance on the cops stopping us and finding it."

"Was it a good haul?" Nick asked.

"The heroin? Yeah, sure."

"A girl got killed."

"Yeah. It was an accident."

Nick shifted position slightly. "Are we going to sit here all night with that gun at the back of my head?"

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"Depends on you," Max said. "You're a friend of Sam's and I don't want to hurt you, but you worried me with your questions."

"I—"

"There's a car turning in!" Sam Rafter said suddenly. "Look at that antenna! I think it's cops!"

Max jerked around in his seat. Nick grabbed for his wrist, not waiting for any more. If that was Sergeant Knowles moving in, his life wouldn't be worth much.

Sam cursed and jerked the car into gear, twisting the steering wheel as Nick and Max grappled over the gun. The approaching car had suddenly sprouted a flashing red light, and a clearly marked police car had appeared at the other entrance to the parking lot. Sam jammed down on the gas pedal and headed straight for the unmarked car.

Nick chopped at Max's neck with his hand and then yanked at the pistol as the man gasped for breath. The gun came loose as Sam swerved to sideswipe the unmarked police car. There was a screeching of metal and Nick could see Knowles behind the wheel of the other vehicle, his revolver in one hand.

Then the other police car cut in front of Rafter. He slammed the car into reverse but there was nowhere to go. Nick twisted in the front seat and aimed Max's gun at Rafter's head.

Rafter stopped the car. "I never thought you'd be working with the cops, Velvet!"

"I never thought so either. Life is funny sometimes."

Knowles had Sam and Max handcuffed and put into the police car for the trip downtown. Then he came over and stood by Nick. "I told you not to be surprised if we kept a man on your tail."

"I remember," Nick said. "But you didn't play exactly honest with me. You used me to lead you to those two."

"What do you mean?" Knowles asked, but he was grinning.

"You found my fingerprint on a locker, but the air packs were all kept right on the engine. You knew damn well I hadn't been near them. You threatened me with involvement in Agnosti's death so I'd lead you to the people who hired me. Right?"

"More or less," Knowles admitted. "The Bronx police found the fireman's helmet and raincoat where they were ditched after the heist. The engine company's number was on the helmet, of course, so they knew right where it came from. That's when we looked for fingerprints and found yours. We never really suspected foul play in Agnosti's death. It was just a coincidence that we used to our

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advantage. I figured if you really thought you were suspected of murder you'd cooperate, one way or another."

"So now that you've got Sam and Max, what kind of case do you have against them?"

"The Bronx police have a bunch of frightened girls who saw their faces, and we'll check that car for heroin. The fireman's helmet had some strands of red hair caught on it that just might match the hair on that Max's head. That should do it."

"What about me?"

The detective smiled. "I'm waiting to catch you on a big one, Velvet. Unless we need your testimony I won't even mention your part in this. But do me a favor, huh? Do your jobs farther from home next time."

Nick went back to his house and found Gloria sitting up in bed watching television. "Where've you been, Nicky?"

"It's a long story. That job I did last week got complicated."

"You coming to bed?"

It was almost midnight and he was tired. But there was something more to be done. "Not yet," he decided. "I'm going out again for a while."

He drove to the playground once more and walked across it toward the firehouse where it all began. Under the full moon he could just make out the scorched spot where he'd set the grass fire to lure Engine Company 24 away. Most of the men would be sleeping now, waiting for the alarm that would send them sliding down the brass pole.

But one man sat outside smoking his pipe. Nick saw its glow in the darkness, and when he was near enough he recognized Lieutenant Fidley. His chair was tilted back against the building and he was staring up at the stars.

"Hello, there," he said as Nick got near enough to be recognized. "Did you get your story?"

"I decided not to write it."

"That's too bad. Nice night, isn't it?"

"A good night to be alive," Nick agreed.

"That it is."

"It would be a shame to have a fire on a nice night like this."

"Fire is a shame any night. I hate it." He straightened up his chair. "I guess that's why I'm in this business."

Nick nodded. "I suppose most of you feel that way. You're really

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dedicated men. I suppose to a fireman there's no lower scum on earth than someone who deliberately starts a blaze."

Fidley was staring through the darkness. "You could say that."

"I heard about a fireman who was an arsonist on his day off. What do you think of that?"

"Not much."

"He kept a list of all the fires he set in a little notebook. I suppose he even listed the amount he was paid for each blaze. Then one day someone at his firehouse found the notebook, and the men he worked with all found out about him."

Fidley kept puffing on his pipe. Presently he said, "I told you how Vince Agnosti died. No one could have known which air pack he'd take. No one could have killed him."

"No *one* could have killed him," Nick agreed. "But the seven of you together could have arranged it. It might have seemed a fitting punishment for a fireman turned arsonist."

"Do you expect anybody to believe that?"

"No," Nick said. "The police are satisfied, and Vince's ex-wife couldn't care less. The men he was working with are in jail for something else. And I'm no detective. How he died doesn't matter to me."

Fidley nodded. "It's best that way. What's over is over."

There was nothing more to be said. "All right," Nick said, turning away.

As he walked back across the playground he heard the alarm bell ringing. Somewhere on this beautiful June night there was a fire.

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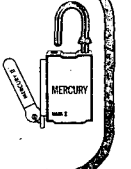

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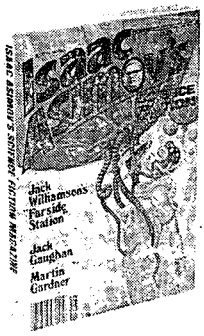

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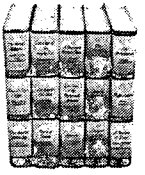

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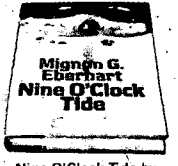

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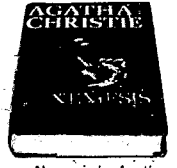

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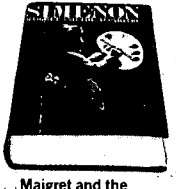

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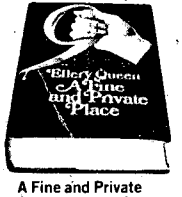

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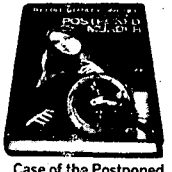

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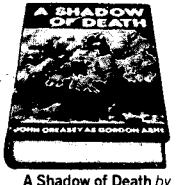

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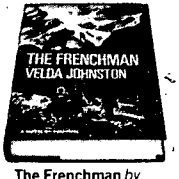

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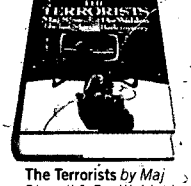

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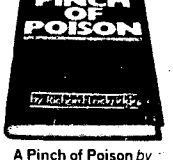

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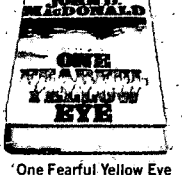

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